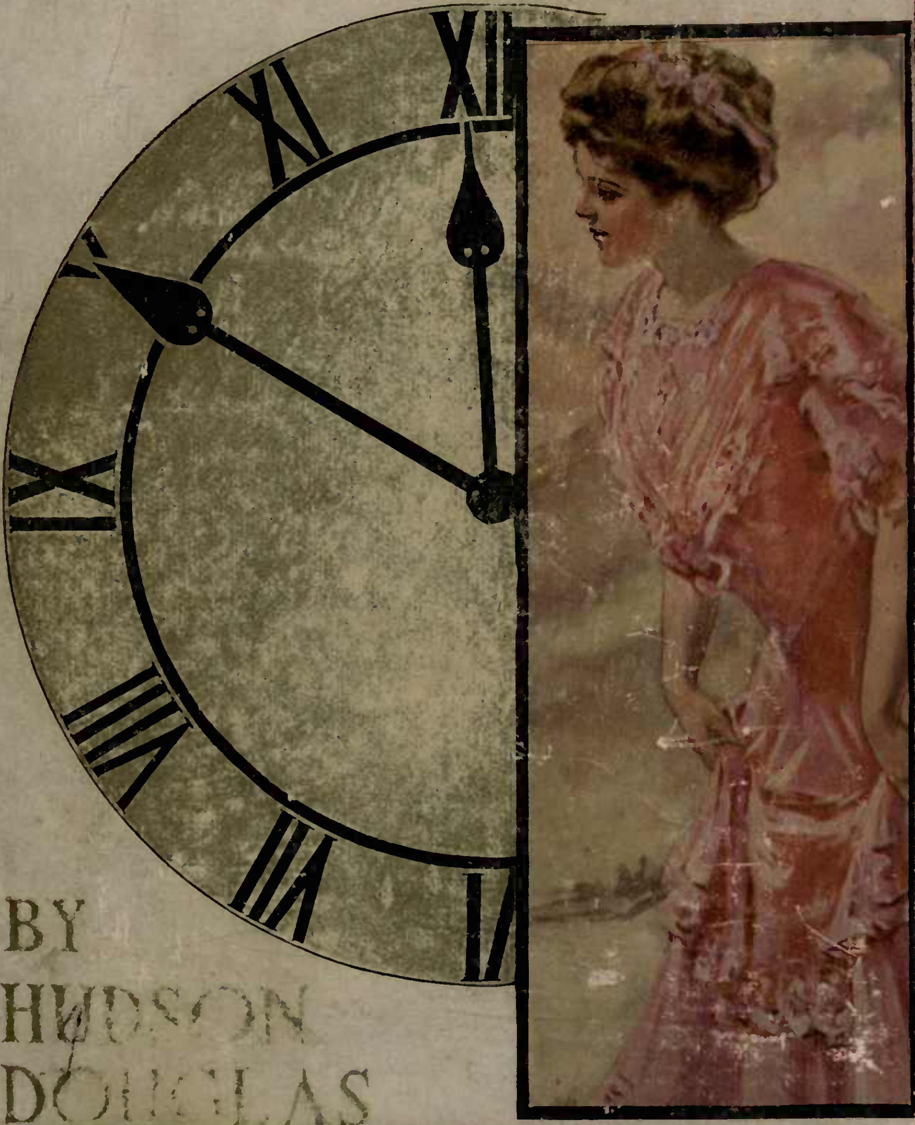
A MILLION A MINUTE



BY
HUDSON
DOUGLAS

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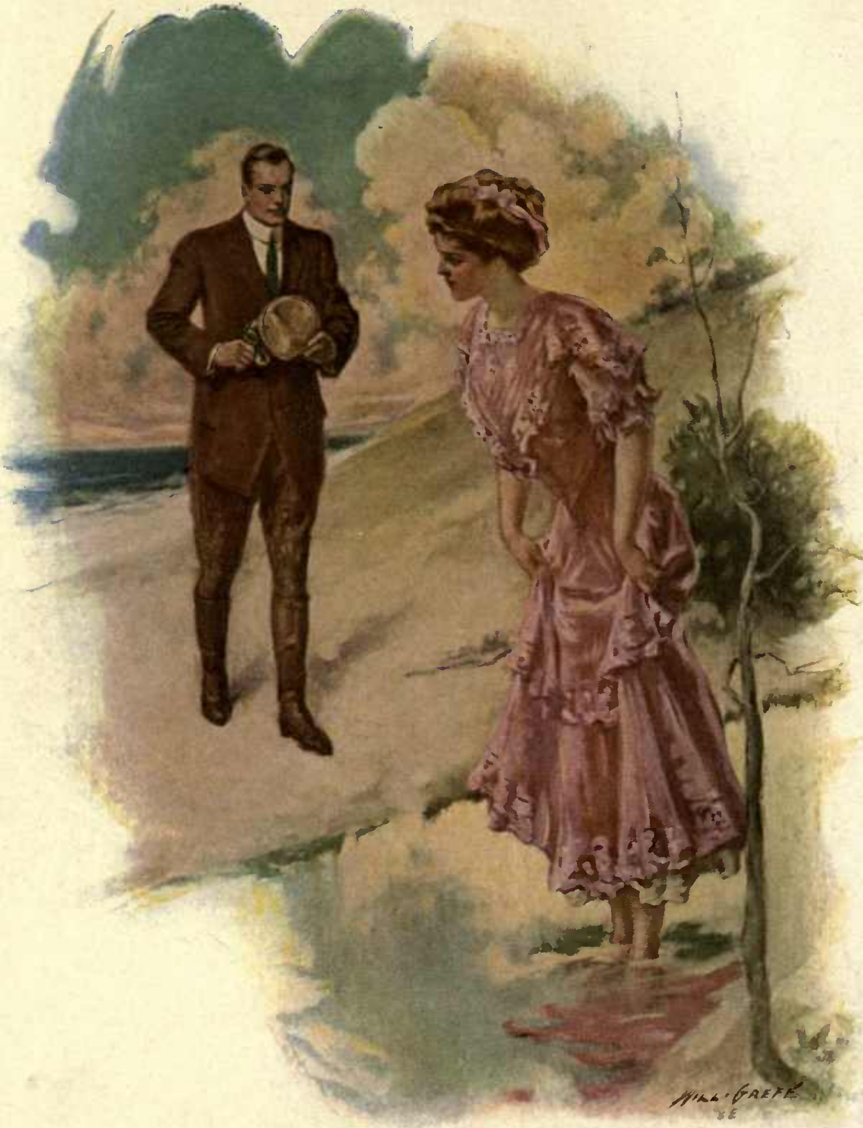
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A MILLION A MINUTE

A ROMANCE OF MODERN NEW YORK AND PARIS

BY

HUDSON DOUGLAS

ILLUSTRATIONS BY WILL GREFÉ

New York
GROSSET & DUNLAP
Publishers

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W. J. WATT & COMPANY

September

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CHAPTER I

QUAINTANCE OPENS A NEW ACCOUNT WITH FATE AT THE NIGHT AND DAY BANK

On a mellow afternoon in late Fall, the gardens of Madison Square were all aglow, like a monstrous palette: flower-beds and foliage, at their most brilliant, a blend of such living tints as no mere earthly artist may ever attain.

Quaintance, looking out on the enlivening scene for the first time after long, weary years of exile, conscious that nowhere in all his wanderings had he found outlook so thoroughly to his liking, paused in the pillared porch of the Fifth Avenue Hotel to drink it in at his leisure and in more detail.

The dry, rustling leaves were letting long shafts of light through or cast dancing shadows across the trim, verdant turf close bordered by low benches all black with the flotsam of the busy city. The paved walks, patterned in arabesque upon the green, rang with the cries of children at their play. The pulsing fountain in their midst threw up with rhythmic regularity a sparkling silver column, which broke, and fell back, like liquid diamonds. The air was like new wine.

A gentle breeze was tempering to genial warmth the sunshine streaming from an azure sky studded with cool, pure clouds which hung there motionless. The many-colored unequal buildings, cupola, tower, or square, flat roof, which rise or squat with such bewildering effect against the blue, had all been scrubbed clean by the recent rain. The white bulk of the Flatiron loomed loftily above its lesser neighbors, one shoulder turned contemptuously towards its infinitely loftier successor in the race to reach the clouds.

About its base the traffic surged in swirling eddies, splitting to right and left along the cañons of Fifth Avenue and Broadway, spreading to east and west across the city, or rolling in a widening wave upon the Square, according to the dictates of the autocrats in uniform responsible for its direction. As these waved white-gloved hands, blew whistles, brandished flags, the surface cars clanked through the maelstrom with gongs clanging, motors and cabs and carriages accumulated in deep ranks or spurted on their way, while anxious-eyed pedestrains risked life and limb amongst them, progressed from point to point by reckless rushes.

At the Bartholdi corner newsboys were shouting extras, and a big observation car, crowded with sightseers, was in the act of starting, its cicerone, armed with a raucous megaphone, pleading for still more passengers. The hoarse *honk-honk* of motor horns blended with the shrill bells of swift electric coupés. The ceaseless hum of human voices was like a vast hive of restless bees.

The tin-pan tinkle of a street piano, attempting *"Dixie,"* came thinly through the tramp of feet innumerable from the near kerb. The watcher's heart warmed to the old-time melody, and the deep breath he drew was one of such contentment as he had been stranger to for long.

He could still count the days which had elapsed since his release from the stark, deathlike silences and gloom of that grey jungleland wherein all he had been lay buried. That which he had borne there, in solitude, had bred in him a hungry, vehement desire to mix again among his fellowmen, to see and hear and feel for himself that the world was not all one forlorn, sun-sick waste of swamp and mangrove.

Only an hour ago he had stepped ashore from an African steamer, and even on the voyage across he had not, somehow, managed to shake off the consciousness of isolation from his kind. The sea had seemed almost as empty and mysterious as the dark land he had left behind him. But now, at last, he could realize that the past had been but a dreary nightmare, out of which he had awakened to a new day, among his home-folk, sane, safe, and sound. And the sense of close companionship with the brisk, bustling throng about him, the quick staccato of their curtailed speech, the evidence on all hands that he was once more but an unconsidered unit among the millions, were beyond words comforting to him.

He smiled to think of the dark fears which had oppressed him, and, stepping down into the street, turned slowly northward.

"The Night and Day Bank will probably serve my turn," he opined, and laid a hand on one waistcoat-pocket to ascertain that its contents were still secure.

"No, I don't want a cab, confound you! I'm going to walk. I want to rub shoulders with other people: I want them to jostle me, just to make sure that this isn't all make-believe. It seems almost too good to be true. And it's such ages since I've set foot on a street that I've got to find out again what it's like to travel along a sidewalk. I've all sorts of things to see, too."

He waved away the prowling hansom whose driver had hailed him, and sauntered up Fifth Avenue, in a most complaisant humor.

Many changes had taken place along that fashionable thoroughfare during his sojourn in strange lands. He was amazed to see the inroads made by business interests on what had formerly been the best residential section of the city, and halted every now and then at some remembered site, of altered aspect. He felt much like a Rip Van Winkle there, and, as it happened, that did not displease him. It suited his intentions perfectly that those who glanced his way should set him down a stranger in the great metropolis. He was above all things desirous to go about his own business unrecognized, and since no one but himself knew that he was still alive, had no ambition of undeceiving the ignorant.

At thought of his absolute independence he smiled again, and so openly that two or three of the passersby turned to look back at him over their shoulders.

Stephen Quaintance was good to look at, a tall, broad-shouldered young man, well set up, of easy carriage. His regular, clean-cut features bore the indefinable stamp of birth and breeding, despite the dark tan which proclaimed that he had been roughing it, the all too prominent cheek bones which told their own tale of scanty supplies. An unassuming assumption of quiet self-confidence sat well upon him. Women as well as men would have trusted themselves implicitly to the safe-keeping of an intangible something in his direct and level regard.

Thin as he was, he filled to perfection his well cut suit of blue serge, and lost nothing by contrast with the sleek, pale-faced, clubmen, out in force at that hour, to air extravagant fashions on their daily promenade. That he was not of the elect may easily be deduced from the fact that he was still wearing a straw hat, but, none the less, he caught the eyes of more than one fair maiden cast careless-curiously in his direction as he strolled slowly uptown: and put his unusual conciousness of that down to the fact that it was overlong since he had seen so many well groomed and good-looking girls all at the same time.

He was, as aforesaid, of a sufficiently modest if not exactly diffident nature. Had he been told that his own steadfast eyes, slightly melancholy, and, to all outward seeming, somewhat indifferent, were yet of the most magnetic, that he was of a personality too distinctive to escape altogether such flattering attentions as these, he would have laughed amusedly and thought his informant a fool. His lines had fallen chiefly in places where a man's eyes attract no particular notice except when in close connection with the sights of a loaded gun, where a nimble trigger-finger is of far greater account than appearance. So while each pretty face he passed met with his warmest approval, its interest was impersonal and mingled with many others. In his sight they were collective, and not individual. No one of them had the power to hasten his heart's beat by so much as a single throb.

He was, notwithstanding, sufficiently grateful to such of them as favored him with their shy regard. It did him no harm and a great deal of good to feel that he might still pass muster among the bejewelled and gilded youths lifting their glossy hats so assiduously as carriage succeeded carriage in the apparently endless procession on the long hill. It even awoke in his mind, among other and equally vagrant ideas, some vague, half-humorous speculation as to whether he should not himself, one of these days, open a new account with fate, and, drawing on that, start out in quest of his own ideal.

He was free to do so. He might perhaps find among all those beauties in silks and laces the living embodiment of that dear dream-maiden who still stood to him for abstract type of her sex.

Quaintance was no idle sentimentalist, but, like most men who have led lonely lives, he had, at his leisure, fashioned for himself an idol of that sort, and much more angelic than human. Like not a few lonely men he had yet to pay the purchase price of experience. It would go the harder with him, then, if fate should ordain that his idol, embodied, lack wings.

But, fate—and Fifth Avenue! What combination could be more incongruous? And what had he, a hardened adventurer, to do with these dainty, delicate damsels, whose happy lives had been such an obvious contrast to his.

Fate and Fifth Avenue! He had almost laughed aloud, so laughable did the conjunction appear to him. And, when he turned at the top of the hill to look back, the long, crowded vista there so delighted him that he straightway forgot all else. It seemed as though he could never descry enough of that crowded city. When he once more faced about it was almost reluctantly, and five minutes later he came within sight of the bank.

A cross-town car had fouled a laden wagon at Forty-second street, and the smooth stream of traffic thus interrupted, its backwash was already blocking the avenue. In front of the Night and Day Bank a choked congestion of foot-passengers was shuffling impatiently, fretted by the sudden sense of restraint thus imposed upon them. Quaintance suffered the closer contact of his near neighbors with unruffled equanimity, and was pushed aside, uncomplaining, by those in more haste than himself.

Progressing impatiently, step by step, he had almost reached his objective when the blockade broke and the stream flowed on again, urgent, impetuous, with added weight. Edging through it toward the bank, his errant glance was arrested and held, for a moment, by a face which had come through the doorway, and passed him at speed, to be swallowed up instantaneously in the dense, moving mass of humanity on the broad sidewalk.

"The deuce!" said Quaintance, and stopped short, struggling to hold his own there against the oncome of others.

"The deuce!" said he, and turned, as speedily as he might in the press, prodigiously anxious to find out which way she had gone. But he could by no means discover again the girl who, save but for the shimmer of unshed tears in her eyes, was outwardly even as he had imagined his ideal of girlhood.

He hung on one heel indeterminately, and underwent then all the jostling he could have desired. But he was as indifferent to that as to the objurgations of other pedestrians who had made up their own minds where they wanted to go. He could not immediately judge whether it would be better to go north, or south, in pursuit, was more than a little bewildered by the strange sensation which had so assailed him at sight of her.

And, when he at length hurried first south, then north, all his late efforts proved futile. Fate, instant, insistent, had bided its time, shot its bolt, and gone back into hiding.

He came to a halt at a cross street corner, and stared very vexedly up and down. He was no longer so well disposed toward his fellowmen, that multitude in whose midst he had lost all trace of the face which had come 'twixt himself and his careless content with circumstances. The next who pushed past him was strongly repelled, and after an irate glance of appraisal, went his way more carefully, muttering.

"The deuce!" said Quaintance for the third time, a faint smile effacing the frown on his forehead as he saw the other look back loweringly. "I seem to be making myself unpopular. What in creation's come over me?"

But no one answered his inquiry. The brownstone façade of the house before him met his gaze with blank, secretive indifference. On every side he was hemmed in by high walls, all equally impenetrable.

The thought of the teeming city brought him now only a sense of oppression and loneliness, an understanding that all about him, while he saw nothing, there were in progress those myriad mysteries which make up what men call life. He was overcome by a most disconcerting certainty that he had somehow made a fool of himself.

"Confound it!" he rapped out wrathfully, "I must be wrong in the head. I don't know how else I came to be here, chasing round after a strange girl like a stray Bedlam when I ought to be at the bank."

He wheeled about and strode down the avenue very determinedly. It was surely absurd and impossible to allow any such fugitive glimpse of a face, no matter how fair, to interfere with his own hard-won peace of mind. He resolutely strove to erase its blurred outline from his memory, to dismiss from his mind all recollection of its misty, sea-sweet eyes. He was no gallant adventurer among women. . . . The girl could be nothing to him . . . . .

And, although he lingered a little as he passed the spot from which he had seen her, when he at last entered the Night and Day Bank, it was with his old-good-humored, leisurely air of detachment from difficulty. As far as his outward appearance went he had not a care in the world.

The process of opening an account there was not unduly lengthy or complicated. He had neither introduction nor references, but he had, what was probably more to the point, negotiable sight drafts for a very satisfactory sum. The Night and Day Bank asked him two or three pertinent questions, and undertook to collect that for him, which done he would be welcome to call for a check-book at his convenience. It also requested that he record his signature in its registers for future reference.

He did so, subscribing himself in a bold hand, "A. Newman," endorsed the drafts, in the same name, and, having laid down the pen, produced from a waistcoat-pocket a small chamois-leather case.

"I'd like to leave this with you too," he said carelessly to the banker, who raised his eyebrows in quick surprise when he saw what the case contained.

"My dear Mr. Newman!" he protested gravely. "You surely don't realize the risk you run in carrying such valuables loose in your pockets. The least skilful thief on Fifth Avenue might easily have relieved you of them and—you no doubt came through the crowd with your coat wide open? It's very evident that you're a newcomer in New York!"

His client smiled pleasantly.

"I've carried them loose in my pockets for over a year," he asserted, "and in much more dangerous places than Fifth Avenue. But the main point is that they're safely here, and here I want them to stay—if you'll keep them for me. There are only two, and I'll take your receipt for a stated value of forty thousand apiece, if you're agreeable."

"They're worth more than that, of course," said the banker, examining with critical acumen the lambent, rose-colored stones which Quaintance had pushed across to him, and their owner nodded.

"Yes, a good deal more," he agreed easily.

"We'll put them in safe deposit for you, Mr. Newman," suggested the man of money, and so it was settled. The two rose-diamonds were thus securely bestowed, and Mr. "Newman," having pocketed the key to their situation, and promised to look in again at an early date, departed, on the best of terms with the Night and Day Bank and himself. It was no slight relief to be rid of the care of his assets in life, and, for all his nonchalance, the safeguarding of these had cost him some anxious moments since he had acquired them. He was also pleased that the name he had given had passed unchallenged, and the facility with which it had been accepted encouraged him to believe that his old identity was by so much the more safely interred with the past.

"So, let's see," he said very cheerfully to himself as he left the highly respectable institution which would presently be in a position to vouch for his new one, "Let's see about something to eat and drink, somewhere not too dull. I want to wash the taste of frozen ship's-food out of my mouth, and my first meal ashore might as well be an eatable one.

" 'Mr. Newman's' health in a bottle of sparkling Burgundy, at some cool spot on the seashore of Bohemia, would just about fill the bill. And we'll reach that part of the world along the Rialto, if I haven't lost all sense of locality. This crowd's too correct to amuse me tonight—"

He thought once more and for the last time, as he boarded a Forty-second street car, of the girl with the troubled eyes he had seen on Fifth Avenue.

"I wish she had just looked round," he concluded regretfully, and dropped off at the corner of Broadway. "But it's too late now to mourn over that mischance. Fate—and Fifth Avenue have been too much for me after all. I don't believe I'd know her again if I saw her."

He laughed inwardly.

" 'Romance is dead,' " said he to himself. "What an ass I am!"

Broadway was no less busy than Fifth Avenue, and

Quaintance, once more in the mood to enjoy its kaleidoscopic variety, strolled down the Street of Illusions, regarding its denizens and their doings with admiration unfailing.

He brushed shoulders with blue-shaven actors and smart soubrettes, inhaled an atmosphere of patchouli and cheap cigarettes, was well content to mix with the mob, to yield precedence to those with less time to spare than himself. The spectacle of the rush hour at Herald Square afforded him great gratification. He took a grave interest in all the up-to-date window displays he passed. Sometimes he thought of purchasing, for the sake of a new sensation, but wisely refrained. As dusk began to come down, and the blaze that is Broadway's boast was deftly switched on, he called to mind many nights he had spent in Africa without so much as a fire for light and company, and the present contrast was by so much the more acceptable. He jingled his loose change joyously and was glad of the glare.

He caught sight of a well-known actress in her coupé, and she caught sight of him simultaneously. He saw her lips part in a faint half-smile as she dropped her eyes, and at the same moment a flashily-dressed individual descended upon him from the steps of a hotel much frequented by sportsmen of a certain calibre.

"Hello, Cap!" began that ill-advised follower of the chase, accommodating his steps to Quaintance's, "I'm a stranger in town like yourself, and——"

Quaintance stopped. So did the stranger. Their glances crossed, and it was the confidence man's that shifted uneasily. He drew back with a premonition of evil impending as his proposed victim spoke.

"You're a stranger in town, are you?" Quaintance retorted softly. "Then take my advice and get back to where you belong before anything unpleasant happens to you."

He waited to see that this prescription was faithfully followed, and, after the other had slunk away without so much as a muttered curse, pursued his own path, his features composed to a more decorous gravity. He had gathered that his expression must have been rather too radiant for that observant locality.

And the policeman who had observed the incident from his post at the corner nodded to himself as he remarked, sotto voce,

"He's wise to be a walkin' danger-sign, for all his glad looks. Slim Jake got his dose straight, an' swallowed it too, like a lamb. Them mild-mannered-lookin' guys ain't always the safest to tackle, I've noticed, an' Jake has more luck as a rule when it comes to a bad man from Oshkosh, a reg'lar fire-eater achin' to shoot up the town."

With which professional application of the old axiom that still waters run deep he passed on to other interests, while the object of his encomium turned into a neighboring café.

The opulent bar-keeper there was obliging enough to mix him a dry Manhattan, and he found the flavor of that quite equal to his long cherished anticipation. But the appointments of the place were not to his taste of the moment, and he did not stay there to dine as he had half intended. There was too much marble and brass about it, he thought, an air of garish prosperity too pronounced for the real purlieus of Bohemia. He lighted a cigarette, and always drifting down-town, turned into a barber's: not so much for the sake of the shave, which he did not need, as to rid himself of the outwardly dusty sensation induced by his pilgrimage.

To the easy conversationalist who attended him there he outlined his theory as to dinner, and asked advice. He was possessed of a little devil of lazy irresponsibility, was disinclined to think for himself. And the man proved equal to the occasion. He did not confuse his client with any choice.

"You can't do better than dip into Martin's," he said without undue deliberation, and Quaintance at once decided to do so. The whole of New York was at his disposal, but he would most certainly dip into Martin's since it had been thus ordained that he should. The very expression appealed to him. It savored of the lucky-bag life had lately become. He rose, refreshed, and, having rewarded his counsellor with a liberal tip, went on toward Martin's.

He only stopped by the way to buy a flower for his buttonhole, again to have his cigar-case refilled, and a third time to purchase an evening paper for which he paid its crippled and ragged vendor a dollar.

But he had both time and money to spare. The past was dead, well buried, and all but forgotten. The future, the roseate future, was his to do what he would with. He had opened a new account with fate, could draw on that at his own discretion.

"And now I'll dip into Martin's," said he, with a nod to the deferential doorman.

CHAPTER II

MADEMOISELLE CREATES A SENSATION AT MARTIN'S

It was not yet seven o'clock, but Martin's was full, full to overflowing. The vestibule was crowded and every interior corner seemed to be occupied. There were even people waiting without, apparently in the hope that some early departure might make accommodation for them.

Quaintance threaded his way through the outer throng, disposed of his coat and hat to a busy boy, and was looking casually round the brilliantly lighted rooms in search of a seat when a brisk attendant bustled up to suggest that there might still perhaps be room for one more upstairs.

"I don't want to dine upstairs," he returned affably, drawing the man out of earshot of his near neighbors. "I want you to set me a place down here—a small, round table for two and no more, up against the wall. And you'll see that no one takes the second seat except by my invitation."

The man looked at him, a little doubtfully, since he could not recognize as one entitled to any such extra consideration this masterful stranger who issued orders on the apparent assumption that they would at once be complied with. But certain coins were already clinking pleasantly in his palm. The stranger's eyes had grown ominous over his hesitation. He became imbued with an earnest desire to carry these orders out, with the gratifying result that his unknown patron almost immediately found himself settled as he had desired, while a hungry gathering in the doorway regarded him with wrathful astonishment.

Quaintance once more bade him safeguard the spare chair from thoughtless intruders, and, having escaped the tedium of picking and choosing from the bill of fare by the simple expedient of giving him carte blanche for the best dinner Martin's could provide, unfolded his paper.

"Tell the chef it's quality I want, not quantity," he requested, and glanced idly through the headlines while the now obsequious waiter went off in haste to execute his commission. But he found in the pink sheet no news of particular interest to him, and laid it aside again in favor of an unobtrusive survey of the assemblage about him.

It seemed that Martin's clientèle consisted chiefly of such as find savor in life and do not disdain to express their enjoyment thereof. There was no restraint or stiffness about their actions, no rigid etiquette save that of everyday use and acceptance. They had come thither to dine at their ease and make merry. They did so.

There were actors and artists, musicians and authors, among them: idlers and business men, representatives of the professions, fortunate race-track followers: a mixed and cosmopolitan gathering, all outwardly gay dogs and good fellows. The womenfolk they had with them were almost without exception young, and, to be trite, good looking.

The hum of their cheerful intercourse, punctuated by the popping of corks, the clink of ice in fragile glassware, the subdued clatter of crockery, the obligato of knives and forks, filled every corner of the cool rooms. The echoes of men's mirth and women's light laughter blended with these in a harmonious whole, the keynote to which all moods were attuned.

Quaintance was well satisfied with his surroundings. He saw that he had come out on the seashore of Upper Bohemia, that fashionable resort where it is always sunshine and summer, where night is even as day. He felt glad that the friendly barber had diagnosed his desires so felicitously. And, when soup was brought, he bethought himself of his Burgundy.

He held a brief consultation with the willing waiter, who hurried and came back bearing carefully a long basket in which rested a cob-webbed bottle. Two glasses were set, one by the empty chair, and into that at his elbow trickled a ruby liquor, the very life-blood of grapes grown in the far Côte d'Or.

He lifted it meditatively.

"Your good health, Newman," said he to himself, his face expressionless. "Here's luck to you, my young friend. I hope you and I'll get on together.

"Good-bye, old Quaintance. You've done for yourself. You always were a quixotic fool, and I've no more use for you. I hope I'll never hear of you again."

Then he sat back with a care-free, whimsical smile, a new man by virtue of his self-baptism, idly observant, in vein for any adventure.

"I don't think, on the whole, though, that I'd bring my maiden aunt here—if I had one," he soliloquized, frowning in sympathy with a fair dame whose escort had usurped a waiter's function and was in trouble with the wire of a quart-bottle of champagne.

"It's more of a place for the kind that have cut their eye-teeth—like you and I, eh, Newman? The seashore of Bohemia, where people bathe in Perrier-Jouet, is only safe for the sophisticated. Look at that scoundrel! He's ruined her outfit."

Such was indeed the case. Cork and champagne had come forth simultaneously, drenching the luckless couple opposite.

The man flushed scarlet at the overt laughter which greeted the ludicrous upshot of his foolish effort, but his unfortunate partner made shift to smile bravely across at him as she shook her head. Her thin gown was soaked through, and nothing would serve to efface the results of the deluge she had undergone. She whispered something to him, and quietly withdrew. He called for his check, and followed her, somewhat shamefacedly.

Quaintance looked elsewhere as each in turn went past him toward the door, and, when he glanced that way again, subconsciously aware of some sensation in the atmosphere, saw that the vacant table was once more occupied. The spoon he was lifting to his lips stayed suspended in mid-air while he also stared at the two who had just sat down. . . . .

Outside, on Fifth Avenue, a hansom went whirling past the scintillant windows with very audible clatter and jingle. A surface-car came thundering up Broadway and stopped at Twenty-sixth street with a great grinding of brakes, its noisome progress accentuating the instant of hush within.

A waiter came bustling into the room, breathless, important, dish-laden, and its effervescent gaiety began to froth and bubble again, the spell which had caused its brief suspension thus speedily broken.

Quaintance set down his spoon, and scowled in abject disgust with himself. He had surely, he thought, come back to civilization a boor as well as a fool that he should behave so. Beneath his breath he banned the over-attentive waiter, now at his elbow, and, having helped himself to the proffered food, sat trifling with it till he deemed it safe to adventure a second reconnaissance of the newcomers.

One of them was a man, but his back was toward Quaintance, who, none the less, knew instinctively that he was not a likeable fellow. He was short, thick-set, close-cropped after the French fashion: well-clothed yet ill-dressed: over-ornamented, from the frogged and fur-lined coat he had cast aside to the stubby, plebeian white fingers so carefully poised from the elbow to show off far too many rings.

The other, a girl, was seated opposite Quaintance and facing him from across the room. Her glance had met his, although for no more than the merest fraction of a single second, as she had sunk into her chair, and within that infinitesimal space of time he had recognized her again. She had flushed shrinkingly as the long lashes had dropped to curtain her dark, troubled eyes, the same sweet eyes he had looked into on the steps of the Night and Day Bank.

He swore at himself a second time for a fool and a boor because it might have been his over-curious stare which had occasioned her discomfiture. The fact that most of his neighbors were still, either furtive or frankly, admiring the fair cause of his self-condemnation was no excuse for his own misconduct, and not until everyone seemed to have satisfied his or her somewhat inquisitive interest in the outwardly incompatible pair did he once more look up from his plate. He too had been trying to think what such a girl as that could have in common with such a one as he of the fur and frogs.

She was dressed in a suit so perfectly tailored that even a man could tell it had come from Paris. Her hat was equally simple and costly. She had divested herself of a grey squirrel coat, a pair of grey motor-gauntlets. The hands she had folded upon the table before her were bare of rings, and she wore no other jewelry except a pin in the scarf at her throat.

She was assuredly not of the soi-disant smart set. The studied plainness of her apparel was somehow distinctive in Martin's, and, in conjunction with her most daintily moulded, shapely proportions, her fair face crowned with a close-prisoned wealth of resplendent hair, had won her the quick attention of that little world. Quaintance could by no means conceive what she was doing there.

That she was ill at ease and in unaccustomed surroundings was self-evident. But her set lips bespoke the resolve to endure, and she made no demur when the man with her roughly bade their waiter fill her glass, after she had refused the wine offered her. She even sipped a drop or two in proof of complaisance, and listened uncomplainingly to the low, grumbling monologue the other kept up throughout their meal. Quaintance longed for the faintest shadow of any pretext to take him outside and break his neck for him, but was denied all such pleasant opportunity. Which served him as excuse for solacing himself with still more frequent glances at the girl.

Quaintance was no gallant adventurer with women. In the beginning he had been disquieted by the strange interest this one had aroused in him, had sought to stifle it still-born. But now . . . . .

Regarding her again, unseen, from under level eyebrows, no less perturbed, dimly cognizant of some crisis, he was demanding of himself where and how he might see more of her.

It would go hard with him if he could not accomplish that, but—he was not lacking in self-confidence. Under his outwardly listless, indifferent manner he was most purposeful, always alert and resolute when the time came to clear for action.

But he soon gave himself up, for the present, to a satisfied approval of fate's ordinance, that fate at which he had so lately laughed in light disdain, a fate fair-faced, sweet-scented, rustlingly arrayed in silk beneath her well-fitting suit.

She had not looked his way again, but—he could wait. She wore no rings.

His own meal at an end, he ordered coffee, a special brew to be made according to methods imparted to him by a merchant from Mocha whom he had met on his travels, and while that was being prepared—at Martin's one may order a roc's egg, if one cares to pay for it—lit a Havana. Through its thin blue curtain of smoke he could scan his enchantress more closely, safe in the knowledge that she was keeping her own eyes under the closest control.

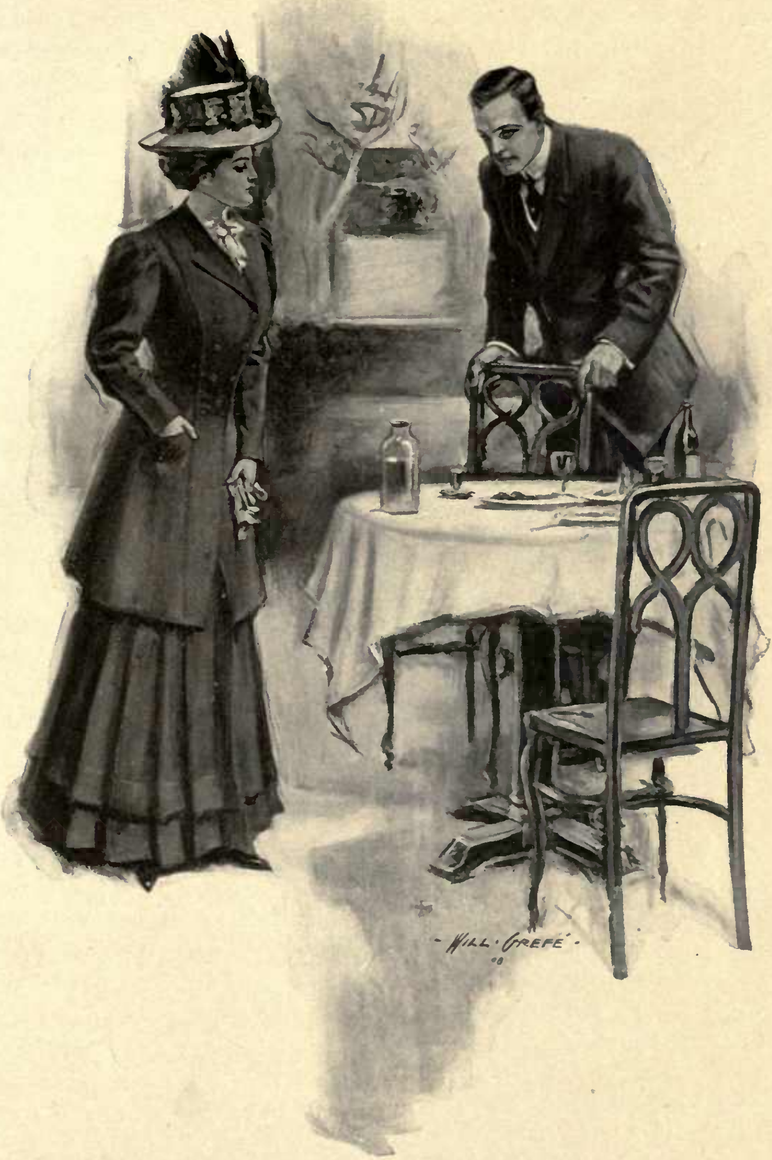
He was, therefore, in no small degree disconcerted when she quietly raised them, and thus became aware of his inexcusable scrutiny. He reddened, furious with himself, and puffed a cloud under cover of which he shifted his glance to the furthest extremity of the room. That involved him anew in misfortune, for, when he hazarded a fresh offence, it was only to find her companion upon the point of departure, while he was still waiting his coffee, and had his check to settle. His waiter was also most annoyingly absent.

They rose and turned from their table, which was at once pounced upon and carried away along with their chairs to be added to the accommodation preparing for a large party of late arrivals. Their waiter came running up with their check, and with him the man, somewhat flushed with wine, became involved in some petty dispute which shortly, however, assumed proportions so serious that the manager was hurriedly sent for. The girl and he stood there waiting, while the other diners regarded them curiously.

"*Attendez-moi içi,*" he said to her suddenly, in harsh French. "Don't dare to move till I come back," and set off, rather unsteadily, in the wake of the waiter.

She stood where she was, quite still, cynosure of not a few disparaging feminine glances, till Quaintance sprang to his feet, white with anger against the man, against his own absent waiter, against himself. He turned toward her the empty chair set on two legs against his table, and, bowing, begged that she would avail herself of it. She bent her head in return, but without a word, and sat down, one shoulder toward him as he reseated himself.

Her perfect profile expressed no undue embarrassment. Her sweet lips were still set and steady, the long lashes shut in the trouble her eyes might otherwise



AND BOWING, BEGGED THAT SHE WOULD AVAIL HERSELF OF IT

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have betrayed. She had accepted his trifling service at what is was worth, and, although he was very urgently anxious to proffer such further efforts on her behalf as she might have use for, he found a not unnatural difficulty in broaching any other subject. She was a gentlewoman, no matter how anomalous the position in which she found herself, and he could not but feel that she would be amply justified in snubbing any advances on his part. While he hesitated, at loss for suitable speech, the Frenchman returned, triumphant, his point gratuitously conceded in order to get rid of him.

"*Allons,*" he ordered abruptly, and she rose in strange obedience, bent her head still more slightly to Quaintance, and so departed in wake of her cavalier, who had been favoring him with a furtive, suspicious scowl. Quaintance had only refrained for her sake from calling him to account for that, as he would dearly have liked to do, and, swallowing his chagrin under the necessity for immediate action otherwise, made Martin's ring with demands for his waiter, who presently ambled toward him in pained astonishment to announce that the coffee was not quite ready.

"The deuce with the coffee—and you too!" commented his irate customer. "Make out my check—quick! Take it out of this, and bring me the change. Yes, it's a hundred dollars. Hump yourself, now, or you'll have me miss my train."

The puzzled waiter tried to run three ways at once, and failed dismally in all directions. Quaintance was loudly appealing for someone capable of finding his hat and coat, when from without resounded the *honk* of a motor-horn, a hoarse cry as of rage, and a long-drawn howl followed by a volley of fierce execrations in French. In frantic haste to find out what had happened he made for the Broadway exit, sure that it had been the fat Frenchman's voice he had heard.

From its porch he caught sight of that individual, hatless, dust-streaked, striking foolish, hysterical attitudes in the street, shaking his fist fiercely after a small motor-car which was progressing uptown at a pace well within the speed limit and yet too swift to be overtaken. A mob was gathering about the angry foreigner and jeering at his antics, but he was too full of other grievances to notice that. Quaintance thought joyfully that now would be a convenient time to administer the thrashing which he so richly deserved, and was half-way across the sidewalk when a surface car came clanking up, the Frenchman snatched up his hat, scrambled on board, and by such means escaped, all unwittingly, the vengeance which would otherwise most assuredly have overtaken him.

"Too late, eh?" said a voice at the avenger's elbow, and Quaintance, back in the doorway, learned from the laughing remark that he had been thinking aloud.

"Just too late," he answered regretfully. "What happened? Did you notice?"

"Not much," returned the other, a man who had been dining at a table close to the windows on that side. "The girl who was with him got into the automobile and drove off as soon as he had it cranked up. He made a jump for it—seemed to have a mistaken idea that she ought to take him along—but mademoiselle was too quick for him and he took a tumble, which made him bad-tempered."

Quaintance nodded his thanks for the information and went back to his own seat, where he found the waiter still counting change. He had thought of taking the next trolley car up Broadway, on the off-chance of trailing the Frenchman, and then reflected that such a course could only prove futile. In the end he decided that he might as well have coffee and finish his smoke. It would no doubt be quite as profitable to sit down and soliloquize there where he had seen the girl, with the chair on which she had sat before him for inspiration, as to go chasing about New York on any such bootless errand.

He sat still, therefore, and took counsel with himself concerning the past and the future. The present was all too blank now to interest him. Life had lost its sparkle, gone flat, Martin's was almost quiet, and half empty.

"That's the second chance I've missed to-day," he muttered, very regretfully, chin on one palm and staring intently at the tablecloth. "I wish she had given me just half an inkling of her ideas and I'd have taken care of that cad for her. I might have gathered as much, of course, but—I'm far too dense. It's evident that my wanderings haven't sharpened my wits.

"The third time may be more lucky, but—I'm afraid the prospects of a third time are altogether too thin to hang any hopes on. I've thrown away opportunity twice, and—— What can I do to retrieve it? I'm more alone in this mob than I ever was in Africa. I don't suppose there's a soul in the city I know, and there certainly isn't a single soul who knows me."

Sunk in such depressing reflections and puffing disconsolately at his cigar he looked up without curiosity as an elderly-looking, grey-haired individual, in strictly correct evening dress, who had been regarding him with a good deal of interest and unremarked from a near table, came forward and stopped beside him.

"H'lo! Quaintance," observed the stranger, and the object of his attention could scarcely control the start of surprise and dismay with which he had thus heard again the name he had just discarded. But he gazed with blank lack of understanding for a brief moment at his interlocutor, and, dropping his eyes again, shook his head in silent negation.

He had not the faintest idea who the other might be, but, mindful of his late encounter with a still more blatant species of confidence-man, and grimly determined that his own incognito must be preserved at all costs, was now prepared to dispute his identity with any who might be rash enough to question his claim to the name of Newman.

He shook his head, decidedly, and, picking up the pile of change before him, proceeded to count it with care, in token that the subject must be considered closed.

But the inquirer was not to be put off so easily.

"Your name's not Quaintance, eh?" he demanded briskly. "And you don't happen to have a couple of pure rose-diamonds in one of your waistcoat-pockets, do you?"

Quaintance, his chin thrust suddenly forward, his eyes showing danger-signals, stared him fixedly in the face.

"No, sir. I don't," he answered categorically.

The unknown was quite oblivious to that warning.

"The last time I met you," he remarked blandly, "your name *was* Quaintance. And you *did* happen to have a couple of pure rose-diamonds in one of your waistcoat-pockets."

He looked quickly round the room, and then sat down, deliberately, facing Quaintance from the sacred chair.

CHAPTER III

O'FERRAL HEARS OF A FRIEND'S SAD FATE IN THE LAND OF OPHIR

Quaintance was quick to wrath.

"Who the devil are you?" he asked hotly, forgetting in his growing irritation the deference due to grey hairs. But in that respect he had some excuse, since the persistent stranger was of a surprisingly active appearance for all his elderly air, and indeed looked capable of giving a good account of himself if words should lead to deeds as it seemed they would.

"Who the devil are you, sir? And what d'ye mean by your ridiculous statements! Get up off that chair—this table's reserved."

He had spoken in a low tone, and menacingly, but the other did not budge.

"If your name's not Quaintance," pursued that intruder, eyeing him imperturbably, his face growing strangely familiar to Quaintance returning his gaze, "If your name's not Quaintance what alias are you using, you rascal? Sit still! Don't make a disturbance. I know you. Look here."

He laid one hand on the white tablecloth, and Quaintance curbed his own intention of throwing him across the room in time and no more to observe the diamond-shaped scar on its palm. He sank back into his seat, and his expression of choler gave way to one of helpless bewilderment. He looked limply at his vis-a-vis, with brows knit in a vain effort to understand.

"Is—is that *you*, O'Ferral!" he whispered weakly, admitting his own identity without further argument. And the elderly-looking man's haggard, clean-shaven face wrinkled into a friendly smile as he nodded quick affirmation.

"I'm O'Ferral, sure enough," he retorted with great conviction, "or at least I'm his mortal remains in a civilized shirt. I didn't think that would have made such a difference, Steve!"

"But I could have sworn you were still on the Upper Congo," objected Quaintance, still more than dubious as to the evidence of his own eyes and ears. "You told me you'd be there all winter, and—What in God's name have you been doing to yourself since I saw you last! You were thirty then, and—you're on the wrong side of sixty now! What's happened? I don't understand."

"If you were one of the Where, How, and All About It Brigade from Newspaper Row," O'Ferral returned easily, "you'd know better than to bank on my being anywhere at any time. Here to-day and only heaven knows where to-morrow's our motto, my boy.

"I'm older and uglier than I was this time last year, but I can't help that. Thereby wags a tale—which I'll tell you presently.

"What's this, hey? Sparkling Burgundy—and a full bottle! Seems to me that you're wasting the mercies nowadays, Steve. I can remember the time when a single teaspoonful of that would have been worth more to us than your rose-diamonds were then."

He spoke conversationally, whiffing at a black cigarette, giving Quaintance time to recover from his manifest astonishment.

The latter's brain was still in a whirl, but he was, none the less, overjoyed by O'Ferral's most unlooked for appearance. There was that between himself and the quick-witted, volatile newspaper man which formed an unbreakable bond, and he knew that he could not have gained a more congenial companion or stauncher comrade at such a juncture.

"That bottle's gone flat long ago. We'll have another," he answered, and once more signalled to his still expectant waiter, who gleefully whisked away the almost untasted wine and brought back a fresh supply.

"Gad! I'm glad to see you again—although I can't altogether commend your method of introducing yourself. It's a good thing I didn't get up to bounce you before you gave me the cue. I took you for a high-class gold-brick artist at first. I couldn't imagine how you had got hold of my old—my name."

O'Ferral raised quizzical eyebrows.

"Your old—your name," he remarked. "What's the game? Let me in on the rules at least. I'm close as an oyster.

"Have you changed your name? Why? What's the new one? We'll get along more understandingly once we've swapped stories."

Quaintance thought for a moment before replying. He had not intended to take anyone into his confidence, but, indifferent as he was to other people's opinions, he would not have had O'Ferral misconstrue his motives if that could be helped. He promptly made up his mind to trust his friend fully.

"My story's a somewhat tangled one," he at length returned. "Let's hear yours first."

"Mine's soon told," said O'Ferral readily. "After we parted company on the Congo I went still further up-river. Got a bad go of fever at a village there, and was laid low for close on three months. Then orders reached me from Newspaper Row that I was to cross country to the coast, picking up pointers by the way about the alleged slave-trade in the Free State and Portuguese West Africa. I came out at Mossamedes, where I found a cable waiting to hurry me home. Here I am."

Thus simply did he epitomize a twelvemonth of the severest travail a man might well undertake, and Quaintance, reading between the lines, understood all he had left untold.

For the two had been more than friends. They had endured together in darkest Africa, and there was also a debt between them. The scar on O'Ferral's right hand had been left there by a spear aimed at Quaintance's heart, and which had come very near to achieving its object.

But Quaintance's recollections of the correspondent had been of a big, stalwart man, moustached and bearded, fair-haired, tanned face half-hidden beneath a broad mushroom helmet, smoked glasses hiding its kindly, humorous eyes, a veil of mosquito netting enshrouding all. Small wonder, then, that the sight of the slender, elderly elegant in evening dress had not recalled to his memory the unkempt traveler, booted and belted, rifle on shoulder, revolver and machete on hip, confronting, fearless, the manifold risks of a cruel death in the desert.

He eyed his fellow-adventurer, escaped from that death at such cost and but by a hairbreadth, with grave approval. They were both of the same scarce type which bases all its beliefs upon scant speech and lavish performance.

O'Ferral refilled both glasses, and glanced inquiringly at him.

"Don't tell me anything you'd rather not," he begged. "I'll take you on trust—if you'll just let me know what name I'm to call you by."

"I'd rather you heard the whole story," Quaintance assured him, "but it's such a long one I don't quite know where to cut in. I'll have to start way back to make it more clear to you. Try one of these cigars—they're good—and I'll go ahead."

They both lit up, Quaintance prolonging the action a little, and then he began without further preface.

"My story's a somewhat tangled one. It starts with a blood-fued. You know what that means—in the South, O'Ferral."

He paused. His friend nodded assent, without speaking. He went on in a lower undertone, his eyes kindling.

"There's one in my family. *In it*, mark you, and not with any outsider. My father's only brother, Miles Quaintance, began it—and kept it up—till he died, last Christmas, in San Francisco. He murdered my father. Not with knife or shotgun, but legally and by inches. It would have been easier to put up with the other way.

"I'm the last of the Quaintances living, and—I must carry on the quarrel. My account's with the dead man, Miles."

O'Ferral stared at him, brows bent, listening closely.

"There were more of them and they were better off before the war. But that cleaned them out in more ways than one. My father and Uncle Miles were the only two of the old stock left at the roll-call in '65, and they were very hard pushed after that to make both ends meet at the Manor. Peace and poverty came hand in hand.

"My father was the elder brother. The Manor was his, though it was of no value then. My uncle had nothing.

"They both fell in love presently with an equally penniless Southern beauty, and—she turned Miles down.

"It was because he had nothing, he said, and he left home on their wedding-eve, swearing that he would make her rue the day she had jilted him.

"They heard no more of him for a long time after that. They were very happy together.

"But in other ways my father was most unlucky. Those were dark days in the South. Year after year went against him, and mortgage succeeded mortgage until at last he found himself in the direst straits, while most of his friends were in much the same predicament.

"But he made a plucky fight for it, till, the first year the crop showed promise of paying expenses, the mortgages were called in wholesale, not only in his case but from all his neighbors. That bred a regular panic throughout the district, where money was tight enough already, and, since there was no help for it, the Manor had to go. But my father died in it first, of a broken heart, not knowing that it was his brother Miles who had struck the blow which killed him. That came out later.

"I was a very small boy then, but I learned in time that my wealthy uncle was the best hated man in Covington County, and why. He had never set foot in it, either, since he had started for San Francisco, where he made his pile. How he made it, I have no earthly idea.

"After my father was dead, my mother suffered all sorts of petty persecution at Miles Quaintance's hands. I found that out too late, O'Ferral, but I give you my word that a more malignant scoundrel it would be difficult to conceive. And she, all the time, was sacrificing herself to give me an education. And I didn't know.

"She even managed, out of the pittance she had to live on, to send me across to the School of Mines in Paris, and, when I got home again, I heard for the first time of the man who had made life a burden to her for so long. I wanted to go West and cast accounts with him then, but she wouldn't have that. I owed it to her to do as she wished, and I waited.

"I had not been with her for more than a month when I had the offer of an opening with what seemed very brilliant prospects on the diamond fields at Kimberley, in South Africa. We talked it over, and she thought that I should take it. I believe now that she was only anxious to see me safe beyond the sphere of my uncle's influence. She feared for me, after what had befallen my father. But she herself would not leave the cottage at Covington where she had lived, even while I was in New York, since we were expelled from the Manor. She'd rather wait there, she said, until I was ready to buy back our home, and that wouldn't be very long.

"It wasn't so very long either, for I did well in Cape Colony, but—I was too late after all. She had been dead and buried for six weeks before I heard of it, and —that hit me harder than anything else I've ever had to put up with. It knocked me all out of time to think that she'd never know I had sent home the money—— The Manor was in the market at that time, and——"

His voice shook slightly. He stopped. O'Ferral's eyes were intently fixed on his own cigar.

"However," Quaintance continued steadily, "the old home's mine at this moment, and what she wished is accomplished.

"I felt that I couldn't stay on in Kimberley after that, and I didn't care to come back to America in the meantime. I wanted to get away from everything I had known. I didn't much care what happened to me.

"I gathered my other assets together, and went off north, making more money I did not need by the way. I crossed the Transvaal and Bechuanaland, and wandered on through Central Africa, exploring and shooting, doing anything to kill time. If I had been a little less careless it might have killed me, as I sometimes half hoped it would. But the more foolhardiness I displayed the more miraculously did I scrape through. It was when a lion, whose mate I had shot, chased me into a crack in the ground and kept me there all one afternoon that I came across the rose-diamonds. Some day I'll go back there and look for more—in the Lobisa country, not far from the old Loangwa trail. Don't forget that, O'Ferral, if you're ever hard up and I'm not on hand to help you out."

O'Ferral shook his grey head decidedly. He, too, had had his fill in the Land of Ophir.

"I needn't bore you with all the details of my wanderings during those years. You've heard some of them already, and others you can imagine better than most men. But after you and I had met and parted, I put northwest, meaning to cross French Congo and the Cameroons to British territory. The carriers I had with me struck and turned tail when we reached the Baghirmi country, but, as luck would have it, I ran across a Frenchman's convoy ten days out from Fort Bretonnet, and he carried me in there. It seemed that I couldn't lose myself, no matter how hard I tried.

"I had arranged some time before to have my mail sent up to the fort from the coast, not feeling sure whether I might not break back east from that point toward Darfur, and when I arrived I found a letter awaiting me. Think of that—one letter—after so long. It made me sour to think that I counted for so little among men—although, of course, it was all my own fault.

"But, as it turned out, that one was more than sufficient. It was from my precious uncle, a post-mortem message, forwarded by my own lawyers, and had been following me about for a long time. I wish it had never found me."

He swallowed a sip of wine, looked unseeingly round the now almost empty room, and went on again.

"My uncle was dead, and, dying, he had repented the work of his lifetime. He wanted to purchase absolution for that by paying blood-money to me, the son of the man he had murdered. That shows you the sort of fellow he was. It makes me hot to think of it, even now.

"And that wasn't all. There was a condition attached in the shape of his adopted daughter, the orphan child of a Southern soldier he had befriended, whom I must marry in order to inherit his millions. Thus, quoth he, the most unfortunate feud which had sundered us while he lived would be healed. And, for added argument, he informed me that, if I failed to comply with his wishes within a twelvemonth, the money he had amassed would all go to charity, while the girl, whom he had brought up in luxury, would be left penniless.

"There was an infernal arrangement for you! He was as cunning as he was cruel. He must have known that nothing would tempt me to touch a penny of his, and how it would hurt me to harm an innocent girl.

"That sickened me of Fort Bretonnet. The Frenchmen were very hospitable and begged me to stay, but I wanted to get back into the wilds by myself and think. The life I had been leading had left me half a savage. In my hurry I got together a worse gang of rascals than those who had just deserted me, and set off with them for the lake north of Palla, from which you can reach a waterway that will take you through to Nigeria.

"It was most damnable going, but I kept them at it until we had crossed the Cameroon border, and there they in turn went back on me, bolting one night with all my trade goods, copper wire and calico I carried with me to pay my way in presents, leaving me only my canoe with my personal effects and a few provisions in the cruellest corner in Africa.

"I sat up and called myself names then, but it was too late to number off all the different sorts of a fool I felt, and I thought that I might after all reach Yola, where the British have a garrison.

"The natives round there are cannibals, as you know, and I didn't do much traveling by daylight, so that I made pretty poor progress. It took me forty-eight hours to reach the fork of the Benue, with the current, and that was forty-eight miles, I reckoned.

"However, I got across to the western bank before daybreak, and drew in under the growth by the river-edge so's to escape observation. It was steaming hot, and the place stank. You know the rank, rotten smell of dead marigold. I couldn't sleep, tired out as I was, so I ran through my uncle's letter again, just to pass the time, although I had thought it threadbare already. But I couldn't think what I was going to do about it—I mean for the girl.

"I knew nothing of her, and she less of me, but she at least had never done me or mine harm, and it seemed hard that she alone should be the scapegoat. I was independent financially—I had sight drafts with me for all I possessed, except the Manor, and the two rose-diamonds as well. So long as I scraped through alive with these I need never want. But with her it was quite different, and that through no fault of her own.

"Well, I was lying there in the shade, sweating, body and brains, when I saw a canoe coming down-river round the bend, and dropped the letter to pick up my rifle. I was half afraid that I had been spotted. But no more followed it, and there was only a single man in the one I had sighted. He was sitting bolt upright, with his paddle athwartships, doing no work and drifting along at an easy pace.

"When he came a little nearer I saw he was wearing a helmet, which gave me a jolt. I couldn't conceive what a white man could be doing there alone, but, in any case, I hailed him several times—and he paid not the slightest attention. An eddy caught the canoe, and it went sagging away toward midstream. On the spur of the moment I put out after him.

"I raised my voice as I ran alongside, but still he did not reply, and a single glance showed me that he was dead. They had done things to him as well as killed him, for—he had no face. He was held in position by two short spears, one under each shoulder-blade, a haft made fast to each gunwale. I felt sick, very sick, then, O'Ferral.

"But he had been a white man, and I was bound to do something. I drove both canoes back among the branches, and picketed them with my paddles while I—held an inquest on him. He was very raggedly dressed, could not have been either soldier, skypilot or trader, and it wasn't a nice thing to have to do, but I did it. I wanted some clue. I found none.

"As soon as I'd finished I flopped down in my own craft, and my fingers fell on my uncle's letter.

"That gave me my cue like a flash.

"Miles Quaintance had left me one loophole. There was a provision in his will to the effect that, if I should die during the twelve months' grace he allowed me, his money would go to the girl.

"I may have been half mad then, but it seemed quite simple. All I had to do was to shift my identity on to the shoulders of this poor fellow. He had none, so that I would be perfectly free to choose a fresh one for myself. There was not a soul in the wide world to wear mourning for me, and I could see no reason whatsoever against the exchange.

"So I set to work and did the thing thoroughly. When I was through with it, even you would have sworn from the evidence that it was Stephen Quaintance who presently went drifting downstream toward Yola, stone-dead.

"He carried with him every scrap of identifiable property I possessed—except the drafts and the diamonds, of course—and that was more than sufficient to satisfy any coroner's jury. I knew that he couldn't help reaching Yola, and that I could trust the Englishmen there to see everything shipshape, and send the news on.

"I spent the rest of the day making a will bequeathing all Stephen Quaintance possessed to A. Newman, endorsed my drafts to that name, and practiced my new signature, which is as unlike the old one as I could make it."

"What does A. stand for?" interrupted O'Ferral.

"Oh, anything. Call it Ananias—I don't care.

"So that now, you see, the girl will get my uncle's money, to which she's justly entitled, while I'm as well off as ever, and—no one's the worse. There are still a few weeks of the year to run, but they'll surely have proof of my death before these are up, and that will settle the whole thing satisfactorily. Don't you think so, O'Ferral?"

O'Ferral was silent for some time, and then nodded gravely. And Quaintance's face cleared.

"I think I'd have done much the same in your place," said his friend. "It wasn't an easy one, and you've certainly cut your way out of it pretty effectually. If no unforeseen complications arise, I don't see why you should ever have cause to regret what you've done."

"I think I've provided for every eventuality," Quaintance asserted with some return of his usual cheerful self-confidence. I think I've made everything safe for the girl—and myself."

O'Ferral nodded again.

"You've done what you could," he said briefly. "No man can do more. It's up to fate now, and— How did you get home? What happened then?"

"I had a pretty rough time of it after that, living Lord knows how and not knowing where to turn. I didn't dare to go on to Yola, lest I should spoil all by my appearance there, and I had staked too much to risk that. But providence preserved me in my folly. I got as far north as Lake Tchad, where I was picked up by an exploring party, whom I told truthfully that I had been deserted by my carriers, and they were not over-inquisitive. With them I worked toward the coast, and as soon as I struck quick transport I hurried on. They know me in Lokoja and Forçados as Newman, and you won't forget now, O'Ferral, that Quaintance is dead and buried. I would have told no one but you my story, and for that matter, no one else is interested enough in me to ask any questions.

"Fill your glass, and let's talk about something else."

O'Ferral took his elbows off the table, and rolled himself a cigarette. He had listened with the closest attention to his friend's strange tale, and was wondering what the sequel might be. But Quaintance, having relieved his mind, was already occupied with other and more urgent ideas, and presently spoke again.

"Did you notice a girl who went out just as you must have entered?" he asked ingenuously, and the correspondent, waking from visions of the wild world and Africa, of a sluggish, broad, brown river, a dead man afloat in a frail canoe on its currents, came back to a sudden consciousness that he was in Martin's, between Fifth Avenue and Broadway in New York, that close to him crowded street cars were whirring past, that everywhere there was brisk life and light and bustle. Stray parties were already appearing for supper. The other tables were shining afresh, under shaded candles, with snowy linen, bright crystal and cutlery.

"What's that?" he inquired, blinking, bewildered, and Quaintance repeated the question.

"A girl, eh? Oh, yes, I noticed a girl—and a man—and you, all at the same time. I was much inclined to assault and batter that rat-faced scoundrel myself.

" I came in here at your heels, after he'd got away, to find out whether it was really you I had seen on the street."

"Have you any idea who she is?" Quaintance questioned with all the indifference he could assume, but O'Ferral shook his grey head.

"Not the very slightest," he answered, carelessly also, but with a low laugh. His friend's affectation had not escaped his observance. "Not the very slightest, Steve. Why?"

Quaintance did not at once reply.

"I'm going to buy a motor car in the morning," said he. "Where's the best place to get one?"

"What sort of a car?"

"The best."

"But for what purpose?"

"To find that girl."

CHAPTER IV

FANCHETTE FINDS ONLY A HUNDRED FRANCS IN THE COFFER

The girl had not been unaware of Quaintance's covert scrutiny. It had hurt her more, perhaps, than anything else she had had to endure since she had encountered her most unwelcome companion. And that had not been either little or light.

She had intuitively adjudged him a gentleman, and had been by so much the more ashamed that he should see her in such a plight. The first swift glance in which her eyes had met his for a fateful moment had carried to him an appeal for compassionate surmise. That he had but partially understood . . . . And there was so much more he might wholly misunderstand.

The exotic atmosphere of Martin's was a strange one to her. She could not but know that she must be conspicuous in it, and yet, but for the consciousness of his regard, she might have left it unmoved by the thought that the throng there had been witnesses of her discomfiture.

She had remained unconcerned enough outwardly during the meal, but felt sure that, none the less, everyone must have seen what she was suffering. And when at last it came to an end she rose with a sense of relief inexpressible, only to be left standing among all those men and women who seemed to have no faintest scruples as to staring her out of countenance. She was much inclined to refuse the courtesy Quaintance proffered her, and seek safety in instant flight.

But, as it turned out, she would not have had time for that, and the grave-faced young man in the blue serge suit did not venture to address her, as she had half feared he might. Her bemuddled escort came back to her almost immediately. She rose, and followed him out of the room.

She had stipulated ere entering the restaurant that they were to part at the door, where her car was waiting, but the wine he had imbibed had rendered him quarrelsome, and when she reminded him of his promise he contradicted her flatly. She saw that any further sacrifice she might make in order to escape open rupture with him would be in vain, and was almost desperate. But she silently took the left-hand seat at his order, and he went forward to set the engine in motion.

At sight of him stooping over it, a sudden, rash resolution inspired her to slip to the wheel. She laid one hand on the horn, and, as he rose, his purpose accomplished, squeezed out a single loud blast which caused him to spring toward the pavement. Ere he could understand what had happened, she had set the lever, with trembling fingers, and backed away a few yards. Broadway was less busy at that hour.

She took her foot off the brake and moved forward, wheeling as he made a rush at her, striking him full in the face as he strove to make good his footing on the off step.

He stumbled and fell, letting go his hold of the hood with a howl of rage. She put on speed, dashed safely over the cross street in front of a loaded truck which further delayed him, and, having thus made sure of her distance, slowed down to a more sensible pace, and so fled from him.

Her scarlet lips were tightly compressed and a single furrow on her white forehead bespoke a depth of determination which boded ill for any who might seek to interfere. She was steeling herself against a conscience which whispered that it had all been very unladylike, and undignified. She had actually assaulted the man. If anyone stopped her on that account she would be in a worse case than ever. She made up her mind that no one should stop her, and steered with nice dexterity through Herald Square.

A few blocks further on she turned west as far as Eighth Avenue, ran down to Twenty-seventh street, and, facing inward again, with an ever increasing sense of security, held for the East River and Thirty-fourth Street Ferry.

At the dock there she had five minutes to wait ere creeping on to the boat, and that interval she spent somewhat fearfully in disguising herself as well as she might in a motor costume. Duster, cap, and goggles she donned in haste, drawing the collar well over her dimpled chin, knotting a close veil round the silken glory of her heavy crown of hair. But, try as she might, she could not hide from the eyes of men all trace of her beauty, and many inquisitive glances were centred on her as she sat immobile in her place, the lights gleaming warmly against the wild-rose of her cheeks, her curved lips rather tremulous now that the tense strain she had been under was somewhat relaxed.

Long Island City at night-time confused her sadly, and she went astray more than once in her nervousness ere striking the main road to Jamaica. Had she dared to ask directions she would have saved the delay, but rather than leave any clue to her passing she puzzled it out for herself, in the hope that she might be able to make up for lost time later.

Her light car was traveling smoothly, but, not long after she had begun to put on speed at an unfrequented part of the road, an ominous discord warned her of coming trouble. It came. She was left with only way enough on to reach the roadside when the power failed her, and she found herself stranded.

The mischance was a most untimely one, and, treading so close on the heels of that which she had just contrived to surmount at such cost to herself, but for which she could have been safe at home long ere now, it was doubly depressing. She knew that Fanchette would be frantic with fear for her. What she should do now she was not quite sure.

There was no train to be counted upon till morning. To travel by train would also double the risk of detection, and it was for that very reason that she had elected to trust to the car and her own ability. It was half-past ten by the clock before her, too late to telegraph.

She bit her lip, and got out, since she had no option but to attempt repair, drawing off her gauntlets, raising her veil, and turning down her coat-collar with business-like haste. The night was dark. She took one of the lamps from its bracket, and, lifting the bonnet, made careful search for the cause of catastrophe. In that she displayed intimate acquaintance with all the details of the mechanism, but, deft as she was, she could not arrive at any solution of the problem set her.

She was almost in despair when, looking up, she saw two glaring headlights approaching her from the direction of Jamaica, and renewed hope sprang up within her. Surely the occupants of any other car would not pass without offering assistance, she thought.

In her urgent need she even stepped out into the roadway, holding her lamp up lest they should speed by unseeing. But at that moment the echo of a man's voice, singing jovially, came down the wind to her, and, hearing it, her courage ebbed to a still lower mark. She drew back hurriedly and hid herself behind her own tonneau as best she could, stooping over the rear tire there. The dread that some returning roysterer from Rockaway or Long Beach might only prove an added complication forced her to the conclusion that she must rely upon her own resources and sort things out unaided, even though that should take all night.

But she had changed her mind too late. The dust-cloud trailing in the wake of a fast auto slowed down and hung low in the dim light, rising again in a thick, eddying whirl as the brakes were applied with a rash fervor which went far to confirm her fears.

"In trouble, comrade?" cried the voice of one well satisfied with himself and the world in general, and a scratched, shabby car was drawn up head to head with hers, a solitary individual descended from it.

He advanced floridly, puffing a huge cigar, a tall, broad-shouldered young man, well set up, of easy, if somewhat swaggering carriage. His face was thin, the cheek-bones prominent, its skin tanned to a hue which gave his eyes undue effect.

"What's gone wrong?" he demanded with the casual ease of one accustomed to vouch for his own worth, and, as the girl rose, facing him in the full light of his big head-lamps, pursed up his lips as if to whistle.

"A lady!" he exclaimed, looking about him even as he bowed with an exaggerated courtesy.

"A lady—and alone. Has your chauffeur deserted you? If so, I hope you'll let me replace him."

She would willingly have informed him that she had a chauffeur in the near neighborhood, but, little as she was prepossessed by his appearance, she could not frame her lips to the untruth. He was not in the usual garb of a motorist, and she thought he bore some resemblance to the man in a blue serge suit whom she had seen at Martin's. But instinct told her that he was not to be described as gentleman, and that, therefore, he could not be the same.

"Thank you," she said, as levelly as she might, "there's nothing you can do for me. I've managed all right myself."

"Then I may at least have the pleasure of cranking up," he opined, and proceeded to do so, but with the uncomfortable result that, after a few irregular explosions, the engine came to a full stop again.

He looked at her amusedly from under uplifted eyebrows, and, while she blushed over her ineffectual prevarication, became more than ever impressed with her beauty.

"You haven't managed quite as successfully as we must before we get this toy to go again," he protested with a plausible assumption of sympathy. "It's lucky that I came along just now—for you as well as myself."

He bowed again, with a flourish, and then took upon himself the task of setting things straight, but going to work with a leisurely air very trying to her in her hurry.

"I've been dining down at Long Beach, you see," he informed her conversationally. "I don't care much for Manhattan in broad daylight, and I'm very fond of the seashore. But after the lamps are lit, little old New York's not such a bad place. I'm on my way in to supper there now."

Every now and then, he would glance up at her with some such friendly or facetious remark, and when she drew back from the circle of light he bade her come closer and help him. She would fain have dispensed with his services altogether, but the hope that she would presently be well on her way again combined with the fear of any argument with him while she was still held fast beside her crippled machine in enabling her to put up with his presence. Only once did another motor whiz past, taking no notice of them, and otherwise the road was deserted.

"If you're bound for the Beach," the man said suddenly, straightening himself after a long bout with the interior mechanism, "I'll run you down there in quick time, and we'll send a man back to bring your car on."

"Oh, no," she declared, "I must take the car on myself, and—I'm not going to the Beach."

"Jamaica?" he asked curiously, resuming the cigar which he had laid aside.

She hesitated for a moment, not wishing to offend him by replying, as she might have done, that that was no concern of his, and he, impelled thereto by her sweet, troubled eyes, became more reckless in his generosity.

"It doesn't matter where," he said, moving toward his own car. "Jump in beside me and I'll run you home before they lock the door. Then I'll come back and bring the car on. No one will be a bit the wiser."

She did not thoroughly understand him, but vetoed that suggestion also.

"I'll tell you what, then," he concluded, motioning to her that she should follow him.

"We'll go straight to New York, and get someone from Long Island City to attend to this. We'll be just in the nick of time for a nice, quiet supper, and you can catch a late train out. How does that strike you, eh?"

He scowled as she turned her back on him, but she did not notice that. She was once more busy with the recalcitrant engine.

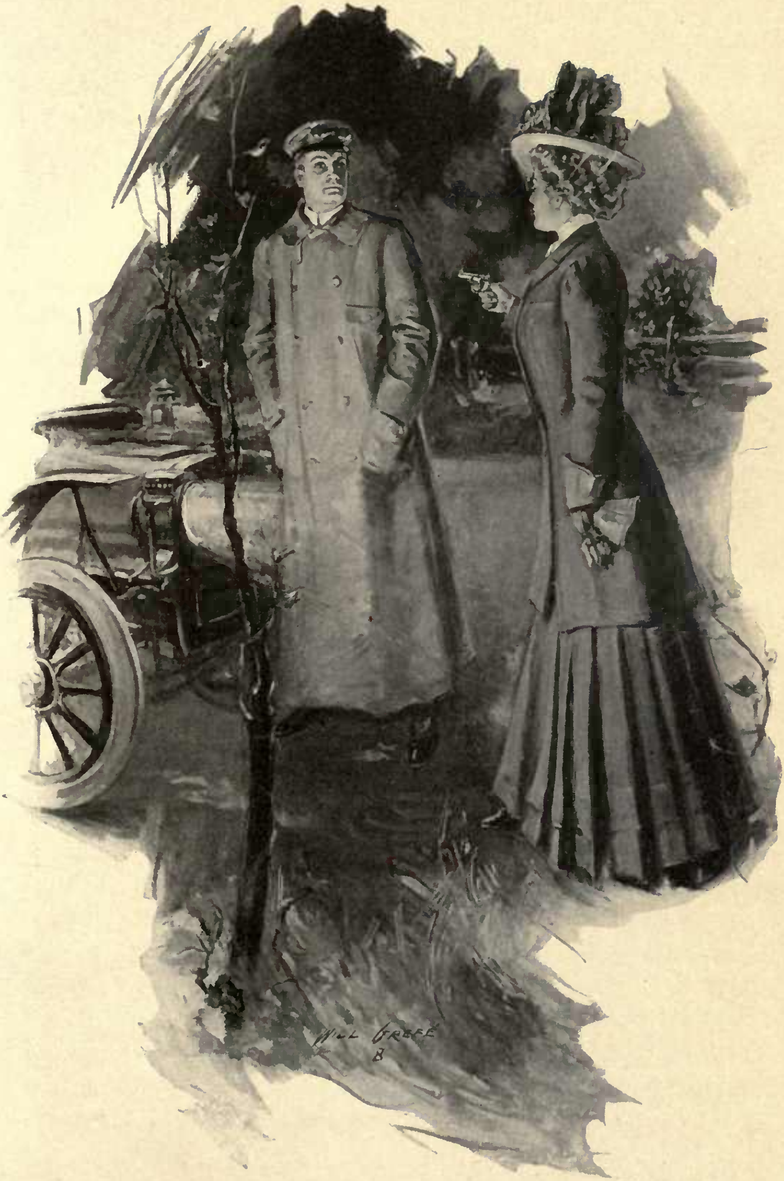
"You're only wasting your time there," he assured her. "That thing won't move again to-night. Say, I know a place where we'd never be noticed, and you need something to eat now. Come on. What are you afraid of, hey?"

He laid a persuasive hand on her arm, made as though he would have slipped it around her waist, but she stepped swiftly backward. Before he could speak he was staring into the muzzle of a glittering but otherwise quite workmanlike revolver.

He stopped and stood still, not blanching, although her finger was crooked in its trigger and he knew that women are not to be trusted with firearms. So that she, who had no lack of courage herself, liked him none the worse for that he was not coward as well as cad.

"Will you please get into your car and go on," she requested steadily. "I'm a good shot, and I shan't hesitate to——"

"I don't doubt it," he interrupted, more soberly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8

SHE HAD ALREADY STARTED TO COUNT IN A CLEAR COLD TONE,
"ONE—TWO—THREE—FOUR—"

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than he had yet spoken, but still with an irrepressible note of admiration in the quick words.

"I had no idea of offending you, miss, and, to prove that, I'll put matters right for you in a twinkling, if you'll allow me. I know exactly what's wrong, although it wasn't my purpose to say so until it suited me. But you're one of the right sort, and I'll be hanged if I'll leave a lady in any such difficulty—even although she does drill a hole in me while I'm helping her out of it."

Without more ado, he lifted the cover again, holding a lamp for himself now, and, after a brief interval, rose triumphant.

"That's it," he announced, one hand on his hip in a jaunty attitude, and breathing heavily, while she kept him carefully covered.

"Now I'll try the crank, if I may."

He did so without awaiting permission, and, under his strong hand, the traitorous engine was soon giving vent to a most heartsome purr. Then he looked quizzically over to where she stood regarding him with her bent brows, thankful for his belated aid and yet annoyed because of the half hour he had wasted for her, not knowing how she should go gracefully.

He solved that question for her.

"You owe me something," he asserted meaningly. "Whether it's much or little I must leave you to figure out. A kiss would cancel the debt—and cost you nothing."

His further effrontery did not so much disconcert her, now that she had in some sort taken the measure of the man. He was a rogue, but his very recklessness appealed to the woman in her.

"I'm indebted to you for what you have done," she told him with a sufficient tinge of gratitude in her tone, "and I'm only sorry you've given me cause to distrust you—to the extent that I must ask you to get into your car now and go on, so that I also may get away. I thank you again, sir, for such courtesy as you have shown me, and, in return, I'll count ten before I shoot."

"Oh, see here!" he began, but she had already started to count in a cold, clear tone, "One—two—three—four——"

And he saw that she meant no more and no less than what she had said. She would most assuredly fire if he did not obey her.

He was half inclined to take the risk and chance her shot going wide, so desirable did she look standing there alone under the dim stars, her delicate features warmly aglow in the gleam of his upheld lamp, her clear eyes meeting his clouded ones resolutely. But some remnant of a better nature induced him to give in to her steadfast purpose. He bowed to her with a real respect as she counted eight, and at ten was already guiding his car past hers.

He went on a few yards, and stopped, watching her as she climbed to her seat, but without making any further attempt to annoy her.

"If everything isn't quite all right, I'm here at your service," he called through the gloom, but she nodded briskly as she looked back. "Everything's all right, thanks," she replied.

"And I'm to have supper all by myself?" he inquired in sad jest.

"Good night," she responded briefly, and went her way, leaving him leaning over the back of the seat, staring regretfully after her.

"She's no snob," he assured himself fervently. "A Blue Grass filly, if ever there was one. I like the breed. "If it weren't for this infernal girl that I'm going to marry, I'd turn about and chase right after her now."

Ten minutes more took the object of his eulogy to Jamaica, and the short run through the lighted streets there helped to build up her waning courage against the long journey still before her. It had been severely tried in the recent encounter, although she had shown no sign of that at the time.

She swept through Hollis and hit the Jericho turnpike, the purr of the power rising a note or two as she let it out in the open. She had three good lamps to help her along and was a most expert driver. By the time she had left Mineola behind she had almost recovered her normal spirits, was even enjoying her wild night-ride. If all went well now she would yet be home before daybreak, and so relieve some part of Fanchette's anxieties.

A silver crescent climbed into the sky and cast strange shadows across her path. Dark clumps of trees, tall bushes, assumed stranger shapes as she drew toward them, and passed, and left them behind. The houses she saw were all dark. The eerie stillness of night was only broken by the monotonous whirr which accompanied her, or when some dog barked noisily from a farm at the sound of her flight.

Hour after hour ticked away without other occurrence, and she still sat steadily at her wheel, alert and ready for anything that might befall. But, for all her haste, grey dawn was breaking across the bay before she turned off the high road on to a rougher one, slowed down to cross an uncertain bridge spanning a shallow salt water creek, and, putting on a last spurt over sand, wheeled into an almost untrodden track through a thick belt of wood which concealed a small dwelling beside the sea.

At the warning *honk* of her horn a door was flung wide from within, an elderly woman ran forth with uplifted hands, tragic eyes.

"C'est toi, ma'mselle!" cried she in tremulous French, and called upon God to witness her gratitude as her young mistress stepped down from the car.

"It's I, Fanchette, without doubt," said the girl, very gladly. "And thankful to see you again, and so tired that I can scarcely see.

"You were not over-anxious, were you?" she asked coaxingly, and put an arm round the other as she saw that her eyes were wet.

"Now, don't cry, there's a dear. I'm here after all, and I'll tell you what happened to me just as soon as we get indoors. I had hard enough work to get home even at this unearthly hour."

Fanchette pulled a bunch of keys from her pocket and loosened the padlock from the barn-door. The two of them backed the motor in, and she locked it again ere she followed the girl toward the house. She also drew the bolt there behind her on entering.

The girl went wearily through to a tiny sitting-room and threw herself down on a couch by the window there, while her maid hastily completed the preparations for a late supper or early breakfast which had obviously been in readiness for some time.

"Draw in, dear heart, and eat," said Fanchette coaxingly. She herself had been almost distraught with anxiety the long night through, was worn with her vigil, but, since her dauntless charge was also so far spent as to confess the weakness evident in her whole demeanor, she was fain to forget her own fatigue in fond solicitude. A somewhat homely and harsh-featured serving-woman, this Fanchette, but very faithful!

The girl raised herself listlessly, and sat down in the place prepared for her.

"It was Jules Chevrel who detained me," she said, under an irresistible impulse to unburden herself of her heavy trouble, and Fanchette's face paled as she laid a hand on her heart, crossing herself with the other, as though to ward off some imminent evil, at sound of that name.

"Jules Chevrel!" she repeated, in a hoarse whisper, and waited, in fear.

"Jules Chevrel," said the girl. "He caught sight of me and I of him as I came out of a store. There was no chance of escape."

"But there is now?" asked Fanchette eagerly.

The girl did not answer at once. She was calling to mind all she had undergone, and a single furrow was once more visible on her white forehead.

"Monsieur is in New York," she returned presently, and Fanchette gave vent to a stifled groan.

"Jules said he had been sent in search of me, and—and that I must go to Monsieur with him. Otherwise—he threatened to call the police. And I—I did not know. I felt stunned. I was afraid to risk such a scandal. I let him seat himself in the car, and drove him where he would.

"We went up Riverside, and, by the way, he hinted at hush-money. He would take ten thousand francs,"—Fanchette held up her hands in mute, stricken protest—"and swear that he had not seen me. I told him that I had only five thousand in my possession, and, in the end, he agreed to accept that sum. We went back to the bank and he stayed outside while I closed my account. And he took it all from me as the price of silence. But I didn't grudge it for that, Fanchette."

Fanchette nodded, and shook her head, speechlessly.

"It was late enough then, and I begged him to let me go at once since he could wring nothing more from me, but he wouldn't. He made me take him to the Park and about the streets on the west side. Twice we stopped and I had to accompany him into cafés, common places where everyone stared at us strangely, and afterwards he insisted on my drawing up at a restaurant he pointed out, where he ordered dinner.

"I had no option but to obey him lest he should create a disturbance, and he made mock of my protests. At dinner he drank champagne, and became still more dictatorial. He had a dispute with the waiter—he shamed me bitterly in that place—and when that was over would have had me take him back into the car. But I was desperate then. I struck him as he would have entered, and drove him away before he recovered his wits."

"You were very brave, dear heart," said Fanchette soothingly, for the girl's eyes were downcast as though in shame. "You were brave indeed! A pity the blow did not end the rascal! But you did well."

"Then I was still further delayed, for the car broke down on a lonely stretch of road not far from this side of the ferry, and—it cost me some time and trouble to get it to go again. I made all the speed I could, Fanchette, knowing that you would be waiting up for me, but I couldn't do any better than this."

"Eat and drink now," Fanchette commanded, ignoring all else in her sympathy for the spent traveler. "Eat and drink now, and then sleep. Afterwards there will be time to think for the future.

"See here is milk from the ice—and cold chicken, and salad. And I have an omelette ready to set on the fire, and the coffee is brewing. Eat then. We are still safe."

She hovered over the girl, and pressed on her the simple dishes prepared with such care, restraining with a commendable effort the question trembling on the tip of her tongue. But at length the time came when she might ask it without ill effect.

"And Monsieur? Will he give up the search now, ma'mselle?"

The girl dropped her dimpled chin on her palm and stared out across the sea as she answered.

"I don't know, Fanchette. Jules made no promise except that he would keep silent himself, and—and let me go.

"How much money have you left in our treasury?"

Fanchette went through to the tidy kitchen which was her domain and brought back a black oaken coffer, from which she proceeded to count out a handful of bills and small change.

"A hundred francs in all, ma'mselle," she replied, making use of the more imposing currency with an indomitable optimism. "Quite a large sum, and enough to keep us for some time with care. I shall manage to make ends meet, never fear.

"And now your room is all ready, if you will lie down and rest."

But the girl did not immediately take the hint. She sat where she was for a little, endeavoring to see some way out of the tangle in which she found herself. She could see none, and at length arose.

"There's one thing certain," she told herself with discouraging frankness. "Twenty dollars won't last us long, in America. We must have more money without delay, in case we're discovered here. We must sell the car."

"Fanchette," she said, raising her voice, "I'm afraid there's nothing for it but to sell the car."

"*Eh, bien,*" responded Fanchette from beyond, encouragingly. "What matter?—so that by such means we escape Monsieur."

But when her almost exhausted charge was at length safe between the sheets, Fanchette found in the news she had heard cause more than sufficient for the gravest apprehension.

"What chance has my lamb to escape?" she questioned despairingly of the dumb kitchen utensils. "What chance has my lamb—with Monsieur le Duc hard at hand.

"A duke—and much worse than a wolf!"

CHAPTER V

THE RAT-FACED FRENCHMAN HAS WORDS WITH MONSIEUR AT THE ST. REGULUS

It was nearly noon before a stray shaft of sunshine, falling across M. le Duc's pallid face as he lay sleeping soddenly in his luxurious chamber at the St. Regulus after a most wearisome night-journey from Chicago, woke him to blinking consciousness of his uncared for condition.

He gaped, and yawned, and struck at the blinding ray, irritably but without effect, caught sight of the clock, and sat up with an exclamation of anger. The intrusion of daylight before he desired it was quite inexcusable,—there was no sign of his morning chocolate or *Courier*,—his dusty clothes were lying untended where he had left them,—the room was empty save for himself. Where the devil was Jules! Of what avail was a valet who did not attend to his duties! He reached for the bell-push, and pushed it hard.

A red-headed bell-boy appeared with a pitcher of distilled water fresh from the ice.

"Send my servant," said Monsieur, in elegant French, and the boy, having bowed with great outward deference, left him to brood over his many wrongs.

It was Jules' advice which had sent him off on a fool's errand to Chicago, that city of an almost inconceivable repugnance to a Parisian of taste. He had traveled incognito, unattended, with the common herd. He had been subject to all the discomforts democracy ever invented to harass a harmless aristocrat. He had not been able to sleep in the train, and, when he had once more reached the St. Regulus, at half past eight in the morning, he had to turn on his own hot bath and get into bed without help—because Jules could not be found. The recapitulation of these and a number of other fermenting grievances much inflamed Monsieur. And, even now, no one came hurrying to his assistance. He rang a second time.

He was still absent-mindedly pressing the button on the wall behind him when the red-headed youth reappeared, with a further supply of ice water.

"Phwat's eatin' yez?" he demanded, his words not at all in accord with his attitude of polite attention, but safe in the knowledge that Monsieur had no understanding of Irish-American.

"Are ye stuck to th' wire, or thryin' to bore a hole through th' wall, ye frog-eatin' Frinchman?"

"Holy name of a dog!" cried the object of his apostrophe in fervent Gallic. "Remove me these poisonous pitchers swiftly. Is it that you think I have a stomach of leather, rascal and fool! It is *chocolate* I ask for, and Jules, my servant. Send Jules Chevrel to me. Thousand thunders! Was there ever such a dunce! Where is Jules? Send me Jules!"

"Awright," said the red-headed boy, bowing still more deeply. "Quit yelpin', an' kape yer wool on. I'll dig out Jool, since it's him ye're afther. Why didn't ye say so before."

He once more withdrew, closing the door delicately behind him, and Monsieur threw himself back on his pillows with a great air of exhaustion. But when Jules Chevrel did at length arrive, a short, thick-set man, close-cropped after the French fashion, carrying a cup of chocolate in one unsteady hand, and in the other a morning paper, his shifty eyes, bloodshot and bilious, his employer had still enough energy left to berate him roundly.

"You were drunk again last night, Jules," he complained in conclusion of a long tirade to which the other had listened indifferently.

"I was sober," Jules contradicted insolently.

"Have the goodness to hand me my boots," Monsieur begged, getting half out of bed in his rage over such futile untruth.

"You don't want boots on your bare feet," Jules objected. "You aren't going to bathe in your boots. What do you want your boots for?"

"I want them to kick you down stairs with, you scoundrel!" cried Monsieur, but Jules merely darted a glance of contempt at him and went on with his own occupations unmoved. He would have a card or two to produce from his sleeve ere he should be kicked down stairs, and, in any case, the threat was a threadbare metaphor.

Monsieur subsided presently, taking without objection the cup which was handed to him in place of the boots he had asked for. But he did not altogether forego his verbal complaint.

"Why did I bring you with me from Paris?" he grumbled bitterly, while Jules laid out his morning costume for him. "Because you can speak the barbarous language they use in this barbarous country, and that you might be of assistance to me in my search. I place myself thus in your power, and how do you help me? By getting drunk!

"You urge me on wild-goose chases in all directions. I go. What happens? I lose still more time and money.

"Look you, Jules. There is now enough of this folly. The next time it happens you go back to Paris, and I find a *valet de place*, who will assuredly prove of more service than you."

"Is it my fault," growled Jules disrespectfully, "that it takes a little time to find a needle in such a haystack? Have not I toiled devotedly to serve Monsieur? Monsieur forgets, it seems——"

"I forget nothing, Jules," Monsieur broke in, in a tone more placable. He did not care to be reminded of some services Jules had done him. "I forget nothing, and—when the time comes, you will not find me ungrateful."

"When you get hold of the girl, you mean," muttered Jules to himself in the bathroom, "I may get the smallest possible share of the plunder—if I can force you to disgorge." It was painfully evident that Monsieur was no hero to his own valet. "But I know a trick worth two of that, *mon ami*. I'll squeeze her purse first, and yours afterwards—since it will be better filled then. I wish I had not so foolishly let her slip through my fingers last night, but—I'll find her again. And, in the meantime, I suppose I must humor you."

"Monsieur's bath is ready," he said aloud, coming back to the bedroom. He was sober enough now, and had all his wits about him again. While Monsieur was absent his man's brain was busy, and when he emerged from the bathroom, it had been decided that he was to hear nothing of Jules Chevrel's chance encounter with the object of their joint quest. That worthy did not intend to enlighten him as to the girl's proximity until it should suit his own convenience to do so.

"Events will develop themselves," Jules assured himself with great philosophy. "And when I find her again, as I certainly shall, she will pay dearly for any extra trouble I may have, before I turn her over to Monsieur. What are five thousand francs—to her? *Peste!* A mere bagatelle."

He helped his employer to dress, and, by the time that operation was over, both were in much better temper; Monsieur because he felt glad to be back on Fifth Avenue, which was the nearest approach to his beloved boulevards of which he knew in America, and Jules Chevrel because he would shortly be free for the afternoon. The one was once more suavely patronizing, the other smoothly respectful, before they parted, Monsieur to stroll down to Sherry's for a late breakfast, his valet to lunch lavishly at a less expensive resort and plan a subsequent airing at three-dollars-fifty an hour, to be charged to his master's account.

While he ate, Jules was thinking of what he had seen after the girl had left him at Martin's. The surface car he had caught had carried him quickly up Broadway, and, by good luck, he had sighted her in her automobile as she had turned west. He had cunningly deduced that she would double back, either to the North River ferry at Twenty-third street or round to the East River.

With only that slender clue to guide him he made up his mind that it would be wise to look for her on Long Island first.

He hired a small motor car, and having made inquiry about her at the New York dock without result, crossed to Long Island City. On that side, he discovered a dock-hand who recalled having seen a lady alone in a runabout leave the boat some time between nine and ten on the previous night, and from the description he got of her had no doubt that it must have been the girl he was seeking. But which way she had gone no one could inform him, and, while he stood there debating the best road to follow, a big new touring car passed at an easy pace.

He ducked down behind his own inconspicuous turn-out: he had recognized at the wheel of the other, beside a grey-haired individual unknown to him, the man he had seen overnight at Martin's. A sudden, unclean suspicion shot through his mind. He promptly decided to act on that.

Quaintance had not been idle since he and O'Ferral had parted, during the small hours and after a prolonged interchange of confidence. He had found it vain to seek sleep, on his first night in the noisy city and while his brain was yet busy with the strange events of the evening. Dawn had found him pacing his room in pyjamas and dressing-gown, a cold pipe between his teeth.

He had been thinking of many things during the dark hours, but chiefly of a face too fair to be soon forgotten. He had been wondering whether, if need were, he could forget it in time. And daylight brought clear understanding. He could not.

His half-formed purpose crystalized, assumed concrete shape. He must find her again, at all costs. By eight o'clock he had O'Ferral, only half awake, on the 'phone, and immediately after breakfast presented himself, with a most efficacious card from his friend, at a spacious showroom on Broadway. He promptly possessed himself, on approval, of a high-powered and no less high-priced modern model of all that an automobile should be.

Then, as soon as he could get in touch with O'Ferral again, he had insisted on taking him out for a trial spin.

The correspondent had his own manifold affairs to attend to, but he had also a noteworthy knack of combining pleasure with business. By a curious coincidence he was called to Rockaway Beach. If Quaintance could carry him thither, and back to the Cornucopia Club, it would be quite convenient to join him. Quaintance could. Quaintance picked him up at Thirty-fourth street from the Third Avenue L. They crossed the ferry together, and headed by way of Jamaica to Lynbrook then back through Far Rockaway and Arverne to the beach, where they drew up at the Inn, alighted, refreshed themselves, and strolled toward the shore.

Jules Chevrel, following at a safe distance, also stopped at the Inn for long enough to absorb two brimming bumpers of absinthe frappée—it is dry work driving a hired car on a hot afternoon—and set out to dog them afoot.

They turned slowly along the boardwalk, discussing the points and performance of Quaintance's purchase, and, these all disposed of, returned to the topic uppermost in that gentleman's mind, a topic which had already been touched upon at frequent intervals.

"I wish I had got a better view of the runabout that girl was driving last night," he remarked. "I don't believe I'd know it again unless she were in it herself."

"I should," answered his companion, a quick understanding smile wrinkling his thin face. "It was a Cadillac, two-seated, model Q, '06, lacquered in olive-green without relief, dark canvas Cape-cart hood, three headlamps. Most of the brasswork had been coated over, to save cleaning. The only thing I couldn't get a line on was the number—but it was too thick with dust."

"You're a marvel," said Quaintance approvingly. "When special corresponding becomes a lost art, you ought to get good pay as a detective. I couldn't have told it off so concisely even if I had seen the car. How did you manage to notice so much in such a short time, eh?"

"The faculty of observation," retorted his friend. "In my trade one has to be as quick as a snapshot and accurate as an adding machine at the same time. I'd have been dead and buried a long time ago if I hadn't learned the trick young. And, besides, I had a good look at the thing.

"I'll give you another bit of my mind if you like, Steve. I've figured it out backwards and by deduction, but I'll let you have it right end up. You remember the rat-faced Frenchman?"

"I do," said Quaintance concisely.

"And a cheap-looking car we passed just outside the dock gates in Long Island City?"

"I didn't notice it particularly."

"Well, the Frenchman was with it. He followed us down here. He's close to us at this moment."

"Where?" asked Quaintance eagerly.

"Keep cool," requested O'Ferral, gripping him by the arm as he would have turned. "Be more circumspect, confound you. What d'you want to do?"

"I want to spread him to the four winds," confessed his companion. "I want to feed the fishes with him. Last night I offered the girl a seat when he left her standing while he was away wrangling with a waiter about ten cents. When he came back he gave me a scowl that would have earned him a broken neck then if she hadn't been looking on. Let me have just a couple of words with him, and I'll be as circumspect as an oyster."

"What you're going to do at present is to ignore him," O'Ferral explained peremptorily.

"And the reason why," he continued, as Quaintance reluctantly fell into step with him again, "is that we want to find out first what *his* little game is. It's my belief that he's out after the girl too, and, if she's anywhere in this neighborhood, we'll let him find her for us. I have an idea that he thinks you know a good deal more than you do about her. We don't need to undeceive him, and while he's hanging about here she's safe—from him."

"True for you," agreed Quaintance upon cogitation, and frowning. "He's a thoroughly bad egg, that fellow, and—he seemed to have some hold over her. I'd give a great deal to find her again, O'Ferral, and, when I do, ——"

"If you do," corrected his friend.

"When I do," he repeated stubbornly, "I'll make quite sure what it was and then settle scores with him. Meantime I suppose I must just lie low."

"But what will you do if you find she's married, or, what's still more likely, engaged to be married to somebody else?" O'Ferral asked gravely.

"She wore no rings," retorted Quaintance. "She's free still, and that's why I'm in such a hurry. Let's turn back and get a drink—I'm thirsty."

They faced about, and the Frenchman, who had drawn closer as they slowed down, suddenly found himself confronting them. They drew to one side, and waited for him to pass.

A wiser man would have gone on his way and avoided their vicinity from that time forward. Their steady stare boded Jules Chevrel no great grace if he should give further offence. But the Frenchman's mind was bemused by the drink he had swallowed in the hot sunshine, and he was in no mood to be browbeaten. He stopped, and eyed them with swaggering self-assertion. They waited for him to speak. He did so, addressing himself to Quaintance.

"You speak French?" he inquired unceremoniously, in that language, and Quaintance nodded.

"You are no doubt on intimate terms with the lady who sat at your table in Martin's last night during my unavoidable absence?"

Quaintance stepped very quietly up to him, while O'Ferral remained in the background unmoved, contentedly puffing at his Havana and noting with satisfaction that there was not likely to be any crowd.

"See here, my man," Quaintance said, in quick, nervous English, "I'll give you one chance to go on unhurt, though you don't deserve it. Another word in that strain and I'll manhandle you."

The Frenchman apparently understood him perfectly, but ignored the warning and went on in his own tongue.

"I want her address."

"What you want and what you're going to get are two very different things," said Quaintance, his lips compressed. "Put your hands up—I'm going to begin."

"I want her address," the Frenchman repeated obstinately. "And you will do well to beware what you are about. If you are abetting her in——"

Quaintance's fist shot out, but the vicious eyes were too wide awake to encounter that, and he had to spring back with all his agility to escape a dangerous boot-heel which had appeared where his enemy's head had been and within an inch of his own chin. The Frenchman was minded to fight with his feet, and was no mean exponent of *la savate.* He had indeed counted on that inelegant science to save him from a bout of fisticuffs, and was the more dismayed to find his opponent also a past-master in all its arts.

Quaintance had caught at his ankle, and closed in so quickly that a savage kick from the free foot, which would otherwise have disabled him, no more than grazed his knee. He grasped it also, and, tucking both under his left arm, seized the struggling Frenchman by his coat-collar, plucked him off the ground altogether. He hung, helplessly clutching and clawing, in mid-air, while Quaintance, breathing heavily, carried him to the water's edge and cast him seawards with all the swing of two muscular arms.

It was high tide at Rockaway and the human projectile came down with a squelching splash, greatly to the amusement of the few spectators whom O'Ferral had been keeping in the background and who now acclaimed Quaintance's *tour de force* with that pleasant impartiality for which American audiences are so justly famous.

The Frenchman rose, spluttering, all the fight washed out of him. There was to be no further entertainment for the onlookers. He clambered ashore, dripping, hatless, pushed through them as soon as Quaintance had spoken a few low, menacing words to him, and went toward the Inn, swearing blood-curdling oaths to himself but without looking back.

Having rough-dried himself there and donned a coat he made for Manhattan at speed, planning prompt revenge for the cruel indignity Quaintance had put upon him.

"They are thus indeed intimate, he and she! And it will be safest to strike him through her," said the valiant Jules to himself, his first suspicion as to the stranger's interest in his own quarry confirmed by the incident in which he had perforce played such a shameful part, his whole mind bent on condign revenge. "It will hurt him most to see her suffer, and—I shall always be there, looking on. And Monsieur must play the catspaw for me."

Still chewing the sweet cud of such schemes, he reached the St. Regulus some time before Monsieur came in from his afternoon promenade, and tended to all the details of that connoisseur's evening toilet so deftly as to win a word of approval. Whereupon he opened fire on his absent enemy, at long range, from a masked battery.

"I have news for Monsieur to-night," he mumbled, a stud in his mouth. "I do not think that it will be very long now before we strike the true trail."

"Proceed, Jules," cried Monsieur eagerly as his valet paused to slip the stud into place. "What news? And whence? Is it that you have seen her?"

"I have not seen her myself," Jules lied glibly, "but I have found those who have. It is not in Chicago that she resides, but close to New York, on Long Island."

"Sacrebleu! Then why do you dress me like this?" cried his master, excitedly. "Let us go there at once, my good Jules. Why did you not tell me before! She may yet escape us if we lose a moment."

He tore off the white cravat which Jules had just knotted so neatly about his collar, threw it to one side, kicked at his man with the foot whose shoe that sufferer was in process of fastening.

"Ten thousand devils!" said he. "Why did you not tell me before? She may yet escape us."

CHAPTER VI

CORNOYER ENTERTAINS A CORPSE AT THE CORNUCOPIA CLUB

"You'd better look out for your rat-faced friend, if you ever run across him again," said O'Ferral, in Quaintance's car on the way back to Manhattan from Rockaway Beach. "You handled him neatly enough, but I felt a bit nervous when he kicked out."

"I learned the tackle for *la savate* when I was living on the Boule-St-Mich," returned his companion indifferently.

"He's lost track of the girl, O'Ferral. That's one comfort. And I'm going to find her again before he does."

"I wish you luck in your quest." O'Ferral's tone was dubious. "It will perhaps keep you out of mischief, but—I rather doubt the result."

Quaintance made no retort but looked steadily ahead of him, his jaw set.

"Don't take the thing so seriously," urged the correspondent. "There are more girls than one in the world, and—you've just got rid of another at some sacrifice. You've tricked fate, the jade, very cleverly once already. Be careful, in case she retaliates!"

"She's tripped me up twice within twenty-four hours," answered Quaintance gloomily. "First at the bank on Fifth Avenue and then at Martin's. I'll see that she doesn't find it so easy a third time."

"I wish *I* had nothing to do but go gadding about after pretty girls in olive-green autos," observed O'Ferral with a soulful sigh. "But if I owned a few rose-diamonds and touring cars and trifles of that sort—with a fat bank account on the side—I'd be inclined to fight shy of fate. I'd ——"

"If you meant to marry a girl, what would you do?" Quaintance demanded abruptly.

"Why, marry her."

"And if you had lost sight of her for the moment?"

"I'd find her again. No, *no!*—I mean that I'd think things over dispassionately—and decide that I wasn't so badly off as a bachelor after all."

Quaintance laughed.

"Old ass!" said he, affectionately.

"But there will be no golden-haired girls in my wretched autobiography," O'Ferral resumed presently. "No time in my trade for any such relaxation. It's a very wearing existence, Steve. When I get up in the morning I never know when or where I may sleep again. You ought to be much more grateful for all your mercies."

"I'm grateful enough," argued Quaintance. "It's you who are grumbling. Give it over. You've got something on your mind. What is it?"

O'Ferral laughed in his turn.

"You're a bit of a thought-reader too, Steve," said he, "and I'll let you into the secret. I'm under orders again."

"Already!" ejaculated Quaintance indignantly. "Where for? And when do you sail? I thought they were going to give you an easier time for a few months at any rate! I was counting on your company."

"I don't know where for, or when," responded O'Ferral, "and, if I did, it would be against all rules to tell anyone, even you. But someone's in trouble somewhere, and I'm standing by to start at a moment's notice. I had to offer to go, you see, because they wouldn't have sent me otherwise, after agreeing to let me have six months at home."

"What rotten luck!" said Quaintance in comment, and to that his friend nodded solemn assent.

It was yet early afternoon when they drew up in front of the Cornucopia Club, and, having left the car at the kerb in care of the hall-boy, passed indoors together. Quaintance was inspecting the painted panels with which the vestibule is adorned, while O'Ferral was busy inditing his friend's name in the visitors' book, when a gust of laughter resounded from overhead and the correspondent looked up with a quick smile.

"Cornoyer again, for a wager!" said he. "You haven't met Jean Jacques, have you, Quain—er—Newman?"

Quaintance shook his head, frowning.

"See if you can't get my name off by heart before you begin introducing me," he requested with pardonable asperity. "I'm A. Newman now, and that's what you want to write me down there, too."

"All right, Steve," returned O'Ferral soothingly as he rose from the volume before him. "There it is, in black and white,—see: 'A. Newman—introduced by—O. O'Ferral.' Come on upstairs, and we'll hear what J. J.'s been up to."

He ordered drinks of the grinning black boy in the little bar at the top of a winding stairway whose every panel also contained a picture, and, entering a commodious chamber beyond, found there, comfortably established in easy-chairs by the big open windows, a dozen or more men who received O'Ferral with jocular acclamation. It seemed that the correspondent was not unpopular with his fellow members, and that those present were in hilarious mood.

The Cornucopia Club does not inhabit any of these palatial premises on Fifth Avenue which house so many of its pretentious compeers. It has its own snug home in a modest brown-stone mansion not far removed from Madison Square, and the carefully polished Horn of Plenty which is its emblem and pride has hung in the hall there for so many years that none of its hierophants would care to see it established elsewhere.

They are, on the contrary, a most conservative body of men, recruited with care from among such as are not the mere slaves of fashion, and strongly adverse to all change liable to interfere with an old-fashioned comfort. The Cornucopia is not a club for the frivolous worldling, but rather for those who, with individual bodies and brains, seek rational freedom, unhampered by newfangled by-laws, for both. Within its portals a man may even smoke his pipe where he pleases.

Quaintance liked the look of the place and its people, to whom, in a body, O'Ferral had presented him and who had welcomed him hospitably. The boy brought him a long glass, abrim with liquid amber, and after he had half-emptied that, he found time to take further stock of his new friends. He was especially interested in one whom the others addressed as "J. J.," which, as he had understood from O'Ferral, stood for

Jean Jacques Cornoyer, and who was suffering from a very black eye.

This M. Cornoyer was further conspicuous in such society by reason of his apparel. He was garbed in a long frock-coat with voluminous tails, pearl-grey pants, stiffly creased and of the peg-top variety, patent-leather shoes, sharply pointed, encased in spats. A tall, stiff collar encompassed his neck, and was ornamented with a sky-blue butterfly-bow almost as exotic as the orchid in the lapel of his coat. His features were somewhat irregular, and singularly plastic. The sight of his sound eye was obscured by the monocle he had thrust into it. His hair was dressed in the style of that on the business side of a shoe-black's brush. He wore neither beard nor moustache.

And, even as O'Ferral had surmised, it was his latest and most misguided adventure into the night life of Manhattan which had provided the gathering with food for mirth.

"I have put my feet into the hot water, right up to the elbow," he explained to Quaintance in a quite irreproducible mixture of French and English, his expression of repentant melancholy giving way to a gleefully reminiscent grin. "I have been hit—*zass! pataploum!* —in the eye. I have been in prison all night—*vive* the glorious land of liberty! This morning they fine me five plunks. It is scandalous!—shocking!"

"Cheer up, old cock!" cried the man beside him and clapped him consolingly on the shoulder. "Cheer up, old cock! and I'll buy you a high ball. You were no worse off than I was when all's said and done."

"This gent was with me," Cornoyer remarked, somewhat stiffly, his face suddenly composed to a mournful gravity, as Quaintance looked over at the jovial stranger, a tall, broad-shouldered man, brown-faced, alert, bluffly at his ease and yet, in some intangible aspect, out of tone with the rest of the company. He had been looking about him with a keen, appraising glance before he had cut into Cornoyer's conversation. Quaintance took quick inward exception to him and was inclined to think the less of the Cornucopia, but recollected that he himself might not be the only visitor there. A supposition which was soon confirmed.

The unknown nodded to him, and,

"J. J.'s a genuine sport!" he exclaimed. "Hey, boy! Bring three high balls."

"None for me," Quaintance begged, and Cornoyer gravely amended the order.

"One high ball," he told the waiter, who had been looking to him as though for confirmation, and Quaintance noticed that he also signed the check for that when it came in due course. It was evident that the other, who drank it thirstily, had come there as his guest. But that individual was in no wise abashed by the trifling incident.

"J. J.'s a genuine sport!" he repeated. "I'm going to get him to put me up for membership here. A den like this is just what I need, to drop into when I'm in town. Is there a card-room upstairs, J. J.?"

Cornoyer replied civilly, and, in the interval, Quaintance turned to O'Ferral, to escape the onus of further intercourse with the too genial outsider. The others had gathered into groups, all talking, listening, laughing among themselves. O'Ferral drew his friend toward one of these, and Quaintance might have forgotten the couple behind him but for stray sentences which reached him from their direction and which he could not but overhear. "And, say, J. J.," the stranger exclaimed, blatantly regardless of his host's politely uninterested pose, including the rest of the room in a rakish wink, "I met a peach, a pippin, last night on my way in from Long Beach. I give you my word that she was the pick of the basket, a full-blown American Beauty and ripe to the minute.

"She was driving her own little car, and it had broken down just as I came along in my racer, a Cadillac too. It didn't take me long to diagnose its complaint, a simple enough one and yet most confoundedly hard to locate the first time you run up against it, but I wasn't going to give her the proper prescription at once for nothing, you may bet you boots! I held her up long enough to——"

He lowered his voice, and the rest of his story was almost inaudible. But all could hear the coarse chuckle with which it concluded, and Quaintance's blood boiled at the thought that it might have been, that it all too probably had been the distressed damsel in whom he himself was so deeply interested who had fallen into the clutches of this obnoxious boor. And only a quick, instinctive sense of the consideration he owed O'Ferral saved Cornoyer's friend from prompt retribution, the club from the consequent scandal.

He sat still, till he had simmered down sufficiently to interrogate the offender unmoved, and, turning to confront him with the intention of finding out all he wanted to know by dint of casual inquiry before inviting that individual to accompany him to some spot more suitable for further argument, found that Cornoyer and he had left the room. Another man spoke to him as he was about to spring to his feet and give chase. He answered at random and, rising, interrupted O'Ferral, deep in discussion with someone else as to the comparative merits of art commercial and art for art's sake.

"I'd like to have a few words with Cornoyer's friend," he explained in apology and moved toward the door.

O'Ferral followed him.

"They're probably in the card room," said he. "I'll take you up. D'you know the fellow?"

Quaintance hurriedly told him the story he had overheard, and O'Ferral frowned.

"I'll have to talk to J. J.," he growled, "about bringing a loafer of that sort here. But keep cool, Steve. Don't lose your temper. It may not have been the same girl."

"It's high time, none the less, that a loafer of that sort was called to account," retorted that doughty champion of the defenceless. "I'm not in the Galahad line myself, but I'd draw on any such scum at sight."

The card room, however, was empty, and neither Cornoyer nor the other was to be seen in the library.

"Billiard room," said O'Ferral, and they dived downstairs again: but with no better result. They found the marker alone, and his grin of welcome faded as they turned back in the doorway.

Quaintance uttered a grunt of disgust as he heard the hall-boy inform O'Ferral that Mr. Cornoyer and his friend had gone out five minutes before, and when, on an inspiration, he turned up the visitors' book, he gave vent to a still louder ejaculation, one still more strongly indicative of discontented surprise.

O'Ferral came across to him, and, peering over his shoulder, read aloud softly a line at the foot of a full page, which said,

"Stephen Quaintance—introduced by—J. J. Cornoyer."

He turned, to look wryly at O'Ferral, and O'Ferral, forehead wrinkled, returned his glance gravely enough although not without suspicion of a lurking smile. The hall-boy looked on, ready to laugh if, as he inferred, there should be some jest in progress. But no more words passed. Quaintance closed the book with a bang. The two turned upstairs again, and scarcely had they disappeared when Cornoyer came in.

"A nice sort of namesake, Steve!" commented O'Ferral, steering his friend toward a quiet corner. "It's probably just as well that—Here's J. J. again! Let's hear what he has to say for himself.

"Well, J. J.? You're a nice sort of ——"

Cornoyer came forward, his monocle dropped, his face expressing most abject penitence.

"I have put my foot into the hot water, right up to the elbow," said he once more, "but I did not know at the first that he was not a gentleman. And so I asked him here to luncheon. And it was not possible then to turn him away from the door. But I have give him the mitt, O'Ferral, as quick as I could."

"All right, all right," responded his mentor. "I'm not complaining.

"Don't do it again, but—since he was here I just wish you had kept him a few minutes longer. Qu—er —Newman wanted a few words with him."

"I couldn't help hearing some part of his conversation," said Quaintance. "What was the end of his story about some girl he met in a motor?"

Cornoyer looked much relieved. His features instantaneously changed to a mask of the most profound contempt.

"Paff!" said he. "He told me she kissed him—and he let her go."

Quaintance's face flushed darkly.

"D'you know where he lives?" he demanded, and "Tell us all you know about him, J. J.," supplemented O'Ferral.

But, as it appeared, the information to be obtained from Cornoyer was all too meagre to serve any practical purpose, and Quaintance had to forego, for the present at any rate, his now almost overpowering ambition to inflict condign chastisement upon his unworthy namesake.

Cornoyer had come across him, he sorrowfully explained, at a somewhat dreary performance in an all-night café uptown. They two had been simultaneously inspired to improve on the programme, but, the management not approving of their impromptu duet, they had been harshly required to discontinue all such gratuitous vocal effort. Upon their failing to do so, the forces of law and order had been appealed to, and these had proved somewhat rough and ready. Cornoyer had acquired a black eye in the consequent melée. The other had rallied gallantly to his assistance. They had both spent the rest of the night in durance, and, equally disreputable, pending repair, the foolish invitation to further festivity had been extended on one side, accepted on the other.

"But I did not know at the first that he was not a gentleman," repeated Cornoyer in apologetic conclusion, and wriggled disconsolately in his arm-chair.

"You're a pernicious young scoundrel," O'Ferral told him severely, "no sooner out of one scrape than you're into another. But I suppose I'll have to forgive you once more."

He laughed as the other's face suddenly lit up in a dazzling smile. "Mind you don't do it again," he added. "And if you see any more of that fellow let me know without delay."

"On the instant," Cornoyer promised solemnly, and so escaped.

"Pernicious young scoundrel!" repeated O'Ferral as he fled. "I proposed him here, and I don't want to get him into trouble. He was a great chum of mine in Paris, and, he's going back next week. If you're ever over, Steve, look him up. What he doesn't know about that gay village isn't worth knowing, and he's one of the Four Hundred there. His father held the French Foreign portfolio before he died."

"No Paris for me in the meantime," said Quaintance contentedly. "I've lots to occupy me in New York—and Long Island. It *must* have been she. I'll look for her there first, anyhow."

O'Ferral did not answer these rambling remarks, and they sat smoking silently for some time ere he spoke.

"I've been thinking over the story you told me, Steve, and the only weak spot I can see in your scheme is that the dead man might never be found."

"Then my death would be assumed by default in due course," his friend argued. "Miles Quaintance's lawyers will trace all my movements. The officers at Fort

Bretonnet will testify, when the time comes, that I received the only letter they had for me and then went west, into cannibal country. I fail to turn up again. The inference is obvious."

They fell to smoking again.

"But what would you do if someone else came forward to claim what you've given up voluntarily?" O'Ferral asked after a long interval. "The lawyers will no doubt advertise, and—suppose, for the sake of argument, that Cornoyer's friend took a fancy to act and the corpse came to life."

Quaintance threw back his head and let three smoke-rings slip from his lips ere he answered.

"That's the most absurd supposition I've heard for some time. But, in any case, I've made my discard. Whatever may happen now I must play out the hand I hold."

He laughed, lightheartedly.

"It would give Cornoyer a worse pain," said he, "to think that he had been entertaining a corpse at his club."

CHAPTER VII

MR. ARENDSEN, OF DUANE STREET, SENDS FOR THE POLICE

Cornoyer had hurriedly got rid of his all too genial guest on the plea of a pressing prior engagement, and that chance acquaintance, having bidden him an effusive farewell, set out in the direction of Broadway at a swift pace without paying much attention to where he was going. Although he had been more or less successful in concealing the fact, his feelings had been deeply ruffled by the other's urgency to get him off the club premises.

"Lot o' snobs those chaps in the Cornucopia!" he muttered disparagingly. "I've no use for snobs. Give me plain, simple gentlemen like myself, without any affectation of being better than their neighbors.

"But I did think that young Frenchman would stand for a touch. If he'd even introduced me about a bit, I might have got up a flutter at cards. But no—it was all to the door for mine!

"And I'm getting deucedly near the end of my tether too! That ramshackle motor comes pretty steep, and I owe more at the hotel already than I can dazzle them with if they lie down on me without warning.

"There's no use of beating about the bush, Dominic, my boy, and this is no time for mere piking. Your fortune's made, you're a millionaire many times over, if you'll only pluck up sufficient courage to face Black Dirck."

He smote his leg with the cane he carried, and threw out his chest in ostentatious bravado.

"Who's afraid of Black Dirck, anyhow?" he soliloquized sternly.

"And, even if I do happen to owe him a small sum, I'll soon be able to wipe that off, with interest. With interest, mark you. For Dominic Seager's dead honest, just as soon as he can afford to be. And this is a sure thing, a brass-bound cinch. I've proof enough to convince a whole court of inquiry."

Thus holding communion with himself, and, at the same time, bolstering up his moral courage, he emerged, from the quieter street, on the floodway of traffic.

"Better strike while the iron's hot," he advised himself, thus recalled to a sense of locality, and, as a surface car pulled up at the corner, he sprang on board, and went whirling away toward the Battery.

It may be conceded that this same Dominic Seager, who had not flinched before the revolver aimed at him by the girl on the broken-down runabout, was not lacking in that physical quality which so often enables men of his stamp to brave bodily danger unmoved. But it must be admitted with equal frankness that, as he drew rapidly nearer Duane street, he became mentally ill at ease, his spirit of valor oozed from his finger tips. Had the trolley on which he had been traveling stopped and returned up town ere reaching his destination, he would willingly have stayed in his seat. But it carried him remorselessly to the point at which he must alight to reach Arendsen's office, and there he got out mechanically.

He licked his dry lips, but turned west without entering any of the saloons in sight, and made his way toward the river, spasmodically, reasoning with himself.

"If he'll only listen to me," he whispered uneasily, slackening his pace, "before he flies into a Dutch fit and does anything rash, I can soon make everything right. But he's such a dangerous devil, that——"

He slowed down still more perceptibly.

"Pooh!" said he, once more stepping out. "All there is between us is a mere flea-bite compared with the stake I can share with him now. I can convince him that it will pay handsomely to let bygones be bygones. All I ask is the ghost of a chance to lay down my cards. But, will he give me that?"

He once more shortened his footsteps, hung back indeterminately.

"If there were any other way out, I'd give half my profits to find it," he thought, very ruefully, "but I know only too well that there isn't, and I *must* have some working capital or I'll lose all. That would be worse than anything Black Dirck can do to me! Now, Dominic, take a deep breath and in you go. It's well worth the risk."

He squared his shoulders again, and strode forward without further parley or halt till he came to a dingy door bedizened with an unclean brass plate bearing the simple statement,

D. ARENDSEN, Inc.
Wholesale Hardware,

and, pushing it open, passed through, in impetuous haste to commit himself to the course he desired to follow. As it closed behind him a noiseless catch dropped down from the beam above it, holding it fast against further ingress or egress. And Dominic Seager did not know that he was already a prisoner.

There was nothing at all alarming about the scene inside. A shabby office interior, much divided by dirty partitions, dimly lighted by two dull gas-jets and a dusty window, was all of D. Arendsen's establishment that was visible until a small shutter in one of the near divisions slipped up and an ink-besmudged face peered blinkingly out at him.

He bent toward that, and made known his wishes in an abrupt and masterful tone.

"Tell Arendsen I must see him at once, about a matter of urgent importance," he ordered, and raised himself as though that were sufficient. But the owlish eyes scrutinizing him from the loophole were not withdrawn.

"*Mister* Arendsen's out—of town," responded the youth to whom they belonged, laying emphasis on the prefix of courtesy.

"Yeh c'n see Mister Braus—or th' Manager—or—"

"*I* know, *I* know," the visitor protested impatiently. "You take my message up to the whole bunch, see? Tell him I want to see him about the consignment of coffin-nails which went wrong on the way to St. Thomas two years ago. And bring me an answer quick, d'ye hear!"

"I'll tell Mister Braus that," the sentry promised, and the shutter dropped ere he shuffled away, leaving Dominic Seager a prey to emotions so mixed that he did not observe the single eye which was staring at him in pronounced astonishment from another small peephole opposite.

He heard the boy walk upstairs, and, presently, down again. He was suddenly smitten with a wild impulse to make a bolt from the place, but, ere he could find out that flight was not feasible, saw the boy beckoning him toward a low door in the distance, and thither he went. He followed his guide up an obscure staircase, along a passage, and into a room at the end of which a man sat writing. The boy at once returned to his post of observation below, and released the safety-catch on the street door. Dusk had come down outside. The fly was fast in the spider's web upstairs.

Meantime the apprehensive adventurer whom he had thus introduced had seated himself cavalierly in front of the desk occupied by the personage who was at one and the same time D. Arendsen, Inc., Mr. Braus, the manager, and several other people: a very truculent-looking man, of swarthy complexion, possessed of a bushy black beard and moustache, a thick mop of lustreless hair. He seemed to be inordinately busy just then, since he did not even look up to see whom it was that had called about a consignment of coffin-nails two years old. Dominic Seager had time to glance around the room.

It was a small, square chamber, unkempt and evil-smelling, scantily furnished with a littered flat-top desk, a safe, a few chairs. The floor was thickly carpeted. On the opaque panes of the window which gave on a well outside lay the shadows of heavy bars. The silence was almost oppressive.

Mr. Arendsen at length raised his eyes, and so suddenly that Seager was startled. But nevertheless he met them with a successful enough assumption of coolness.

"*So!*" hissed Mr. Arendsen, with slowly rising inflection, and in the monosyllable there was more purposeful menace than might have been expressed in many words.

"Now don't get hot," Seager advised, controlling his own premonitions of coming trouble and speaking steadily now that he was face to face with its probable source.

"I've come to settle about that shipment, and I want you to hear me out in a rational spirit."

Mr. Arendsen did not appear to have heard him in any spirit at all. He reached for the telephone standing in front of him, with its mouthpiece close to his lips.

"Wulf," said he, "run round to the corner of Hudson, and fetch in a cop. Fetch him straight up here, and be quick about it."

Then he leaned back, elbows upon the arms of his chair, hands clasped, and listened, as if for footsteps, his head on one side.

"I'll settle with compound interest," Seager continued as though he had not spoken, and watching him closely. "Figure it all out and let me know the amount. I'm on the square, you see, although I'll admit that appearances have been against me."

Mr. Arendsen eyed him curiously, but made no answer.

"Get busy," commanded the other, his courage rising to grapple with the occasion. It was in anticipation only that he had feared the man before him. He was quite cool and quick-witted now, ready to play to his opponent's lead.

"Get busy. You heard what I said. Do you want me to withdraw my offer and go?"

"You'll go, all right," Arendsen retorted gratingly. "Oh, yes, you'll go—just as soon's the policeman comes upstairs. You'll go where you ought to have gone long ago, and you'll stay there."

"Then you don't want your money?" Seager asked easily.

"If you have the money, I'll get it. *I'll* get it, don't fear for that. And you'll get what's coming to you. Oh, yes, you'll get that too."

"Don't fool yourself, Arendsen. If you put me away, you'll get nothing. Take my word for that, and in time. It'll cost you a lot to put spite on me, and—I can tell stories too."

He was beginning to fear that he had, after all, walked into a fatal trap, but showed no sign of that outwardly.

"You know nothing that will do me the least harm—now," his enemy replied imperturbably. "All it will cost me to wipe out old scores I'll stand for—it's lost money anyhow. You've come here with another cock and bull story, and wanting more money. More money, my God! I know you too well, to think any other errand would tempt you to cross my threshold. It will cost no less to lock you up than to listen."

Seager was disconcerted by the intuition with which his former friend had hit the mark, and showed that by his next move.

"It's a sure thing this time," he said, "a cold-drawn cinch. I have full proof with me,"—he fumbled in a pocket and produced a bulky package which he held up before the other,—"all signed and sealed, all safe and certain. You're not going to be such a fool——"

"I have been a fool—once," asserted Arendsen, with dreary fixity of purpose.

"And once is far too often," he added viciously. "You're clever, far too clever to be outside of Sing-Sing."

Seager saw that the man meant what he said, and was about to rise, with some faint hope that he might yet make his escape, when he heard hasty footseps on the stairway. He thrust the papers back into his pocket, and, when his hand came forth again it held a pistol. He dropped his wrist, so that it lay levelly in line with Arendsen's low forehead.

"If I go to Sing-Sing," he said in a tense voice, head forward, one unwinking eye behind the sights, with a murderous gleam in it, "I'll go for a good reason, damn you! If you value your life, pick up that telephone and send the cop away. I'm talking straight, I tell you. Don't drive me too far. Pick the 'phone up with one hand and hold the other over your head."

Arendsen's dull eyes had dilated slightly, and his teeth showed, snarling, through his beard, but otherwise he had not moved. Now he slowly unclasped his hands, disposed of them as ordered, and once more spoke into the mouthpiece.

"Wulf!" he said quietly. "Wulf! Oh, yes. Is that you, Oscar? Run upstairs and tell Wulf to give the cop a half a dollar and send him away."

The steps outside had almost reached the door, and

Seager was in agony. Arendsen, watching him, could not repress a sardonic grin.

"It's locked," the latter whispered. "Don't fire."

"I will, so help me God, if it isn't," Seager replied.

Someone knocked. He laid a finger on his lips in signal that the other should keep silence, and thus they waited. The handle turned, and there was almost pressure on the trigger to slip its spring. Arendsen's life hung on a slender thread until there came a renewed clatter on the stairway, the footsteps retreated in that direction, and they could hear the policeman grumbling peevishly over his bootless errand.

The two men in the small square room drew deep breaths of relief. That minute had been pregnant with grave possibilities for both, but they recovered from its influence with an ease which proved that they were well used to facing chances of that sort.

"Draw your chair back, clear of the desk," Seager commanded briskly, "and don't get grabbing for any gun. I have the drop on you, and I'll keep it until we've adjusted this unpleasantness—although I wish you hadn't forced me to employ harsh measures."

"You're bold,' commented Arendsen as he complied. "Oh, yes, you're bold. If you were also honest to your friends I could have done good things with you and for you. I can make use of bold men in my business—but only if they're also honest."

"We'll quit that line of talk now," said Seager sourly. While he was master of the situation he would be treated with respect. He knew, of course, that all he had gained was a respite, but felt quite confident that he could turn that into a free pardon.

"We'll quit that line of talk and get on to business.

If you hadn't wasted so much time we might be half way through with it by now. I've got a proposition to put before you which beats the gun-running business by more blocks than there are in Manhattan. You've got to hear it whether you want to or not, and you may just as well listen willingly. I wouldn't have come here at all if I hadn't been certain sure that it's sound."

"I'll listen," assented his victim, "but tell me first—What did you do with the money they paid you for those cartridges you took to St. Thomas for me?"

"I lost it on the way back, in New Orleans," Seager answered rather shamefacedly.

"At cards?"

"Cards—and dice—and the rest. The cursedest run of luck!"

"Eight thousand dollars of my good money! And two years ago. I could have turned it into eighty by now. You must pay me those eighty thousand dollars you owe me."

"All right, all right. That's a mere trifle, I tell you, to what we're going to make out of this. I'm on the square with you, Arendsen, if you'd only listen to me. You lose a lot through being impatient."

"I'm not impatient," asserted Arendsen. "I'm really a very patient man. Go on. I'm listening."

CHAPTER VIII

THE STORY OF THE SECOND DISCARD

"After I left your employment," said Saeger, and, although Arendsen scowled at this method of describing his defalcation and flight, the renegade adventurer was not abashed, "I went south as far as the River Plate, to see whether there might be anything doing in my line there. But, what with peace conferences and Pan-American meetings, everything was dull as ditchwater. So I took a Lamport and Holt boat over to Cape Town, and had a look in at the little war Germany was carrying on in Namaqualand. But the niggers there wanted me to take cattle and such truck for my good guns, and that was too dangerous. I sold a few repeating persuaders I had picked up here and there to the Boers—there's quite a good retail trade going on again, right under the Britishers' noses—and drifted north by degrees as far as the French Congo.

"Business was brisker there, but by bad luck the Froggies got wind of me while I was selling off a consignment of Long Danes I had bought wholesale from a caravan further north. They have three forts on the border and are death on 'hardware dealers.' And just when I had the goods humming, down they dropped on me in a bunch. I got away by the skin of my teeth, and with no more than I could carry about me, which was chiefly food.

"They got all my guns of course, and I thought that would surely satisfy them, but they came chasing gaily along in my wake, and I slipped into German territory, never doubting that they would stay on their own side of the fence, for William the Second doesn't favor armed trespassers, in his yard.

"But not a bit of it. They trailed clear across the Cameroons after me, and my nigger spies brought me word that they meant to bag me even if they had to infringe on British possessions as well.

"I've been hard pushed in my time, but those fellows broke all records as hustlers. Whichever way I turned they headed me off, and I was so closely hunted that even my guides gave up, and abandoned me. I had staked my very last chip, I was ready and willing to cash in my checks before the luck turned.

"You don't know Darkest Africa, Arendsen, but I do, and I tell you I felt mighty mean when I found myself stranded there, in a mangrove swamp on the edge of an impassable river, with the bloodhounds hard at my heels. I won't say I didn't feel sorry then that I had left your employment. But, anyway, there I was, at the end of my tether, with no prospects but a drumhead court-martial, a firing-party, and a shallow trench in the mud where the land-crabs burrow."

He shrugged his shoulders in creeping distaste of the picture he had recalled to memory.

"I had calculated that I had about an hour more to live, and was filling in the time with a few reflections to fit the occasion, when I saw a fellow come calmly sailing down-river out of the heat-haze in a canoe. Think of what that meant to me then, Arendsen!

"He seemed to be pretty jack-easy in his own mind.

He didn't hurry at all when I hailed him, although the sound of a voice might have meant all sorts of horrors ahead of him. He simply sat still, and came oozing along with the current.

"When he was nearly abreast of me I saw from his dress that he was a white man, and hailed him again, but he took no notice. It gave me a sickish feeling to think that he might pass by on the other side, like the Levite of scripture, when all I wanted of him was a lift across, which meant everything in the world to me at that moment.

"I felt pretty desperate then, I tell you, or I wouldn't have done what I did. The back-creeks of the Benue aren't like swimming baths. But I dived into the moving mud and struck out at top speed after that deaf man, crying on him for God's sake to wait for me. He didn't—because he was also dead.

"I saw that before I clambered on board, but it made no difference to me just then except that it maybe saved my having to kill him myself. I picked up the paddle and made a bee-line for the far bank without paying any attention to him. I was in such a mortal sweat that it didn't strike me to tumble him overboard right away, and I was a good deal more than thankful for that in a minute.

"I was doing some pretty quick thinking on my own account all the time, and, sitting behind him, with my eyes on the back of his head,—which was not so discomforting to me as the front—I had an idea, an inspiration. I turned the canoe sharp round, drove back to the place I had started from, and dumped him ashore there. I reckoned that I had still half an hour to the good, and what d'ye think I did?"

Arendsen adopted a bored expression, and shook his head.

"I dropped stone dead there, Arendsen. I became a corpse. I said the long goodbye to poor old Dominic Saeger, and in a damned hurry. That was the idea that took me back to the danger zone. It was the only way to prevent the Frenchmen from following me to a finish.

"It had to be a quick change, of course, and I hadn't leisure to sort out my few belongings, so I stowed them about the body wholesale as soon as I'd emptied its pockets. I left it completely equipped for identification, and as for appearance it had been so messed about by the niggers that it might have passed for anyone in the wide world.

"Then I tramped about in the mud a bit, first in my own boots and then with bare feet, snapped twigs and branches, and left all the marks of a life-and-death struggle. Then I drove the canoe at the bank in a dozen places to show that a fleet of savages had lately landed there and gone on again after doing the white man up, and as I was drawing back from the last bump, I heard a voice in the thicket behind me. My God! that gave me a bad start, Arendsen. I dug out for the nearest cover, and clung to a leafy bough scarcely daring to breathe.

"I had over-estimated my time allowance, and it was too late then to break for the open. In half a minute the first of the Frenchmen's black-boys were yelping about the body, and their yap brought up the rest of the expedition at a dog-trot—a dozen whites and maybe twenty natives all told.

"There was a great palaver over their find, and they seemed disappointed to think that they hadn't been there in time to shoot me themselves. They never doubted that it was me, for of course they searched the body and held a sort of an inquest, and the first thing they came across was my papers. That clinched it. It made them mad to see from these what a big trade I had been driving in guns and cartridges, and that was quite natural, since it was precisely what they were slaving there to prevent. However, they were well enough pleased to think they had heard the last of me, and so had their niggers dig a neat hole in the mud and tuck poor old Dominic tidily into it. I came near to having blind staggers while I looked on and listened to the damned crabs all crunching their claws. For the funeral was within a few yards of me, and it wasn't nice to have to attend a dress rehearsal of what might happen to me yet at any moment.

"But in the end the Frenchmen turned tail and made off, in a desperate hurry to get back beyond the German border. And I was saved. I was saved!

"D'ye know that I felt pretty good then, Arendsen? Yes, sir, I felt pretty good! I've often faced a close call, but that one was just a trifle too near the edge.

"Well, after I'd quieted down again, I began to wonder who I was now, and what I'd better do next. This is where you begin to come in, Arendsen, and you'll see that I haven't been telling you silly stories for nothing, as you seem to think. I've brought you up to the moment when I first opened the papers I had inherited from the dead man. There was a heap of them in the canoe, besides what I'd found in his pockets.

"That fellow must have been born unlucky. He held a royal flush of the finest at the identical instant when he was put out of action. It's mine now, and here are the cards,—diamonds all and ace high,—with which you and I are going to sweep the board clean."

He was speaking excitedly now, as he recalled the prospect which had been tempting enough to bring him back within reach of Black Dirck, and that individual also would seem to have been infected by his obvious faith in his errand. At any rate he did not take any advantage of the fact that Seager had once more pocketed his revolver and produced in its place the package of papers.

"Draw in," said the latter, "and go through them one by one. They're all in order from first to last. Begin with that one, and don't say a word till you've got to the end. Then tell me whether we haven't got the game won."

The black-bearded man did as he directed, studying document after document until he had mastered all the details of his fellow-scoundrel's scheme. And he could not but admit to himself that it was a very feasible one, so strong, in its sheer simplicity, that failure seemed almost impossible.

Seager filled the dead man's shoes to perfection as far as outward appearance went, might even have been the original of that faded photograph, many years old, which was included in the collection. Miles Quaintance, the uncle who had been minded to make his nephew a multi-millionaire on such curious terms, was safely buried, and, in any case, had never set eyes on him. Neither had the girl who now remained chief factor in the situation, nor yet the San Francisco lawyers with whom Seager had already been in correspondence, and who, after due inquiry into his supposed history and antecedents, had accepted his plausibly proven statement that he was Stephen Quaintance. They had therefore sent him whatever information he asked, and only balked at his application for funds to enable him to comply with Miles Quaintance's stipulation. That did not lie within their province, they said, and Mr. Stephen Quaintance must make his own way to the address in Paris with which they had supplied him, and where the girl might be found. While, failing receipt of proof that the marriage required had been duly solemnized within the twelvemonth which was almost up, it would be their bounden duty to distribute the estate among such charities as had been designated by the testator.

Dirck Arendsen's brain was busy as he sat scanning sheet after sheet, seeking for some weak point on which to pounce, but without finding any. The evidence was complete and conclusive enough to satisfy any court. Even had the real Stephen Quaintance been living, it would have been very hard for him to disprove it. There was a covetous gleam in Dirck Arendsen's eyes as he laid the last of them down on the desk.

"Well?" he asked listlessly. "Where do I come in,—Mr. Quaintance?"

"Tell me how it strikes you," requested Seager, his face aglow.

"There seems to be a fair start in it—for a man with the brains and money to carry it through!—but a good deal depends on the girl, of course."

"You don't suppose, do you, that any girl's going to turn down the chance of splitting ten millions with me? Hang it all, Arendsen, I'm surely not so old and ugly as that!"

His complacent smirk showed how little he feared such contingency.

"I shouldn't think so," Arendsen had to admit, however grudgingly. It did not suit his own purpose to see things in a too roseate light—but he could not deny that no girl within the range of his own imagination but would put up with the man for the sake of the money.

"Have you got his diaries with you?" he demanded.

"Nope," said Seager. "They're at the hotel, but I've memorized the most of their contents. I can account fully for the last eight or nine years of Stephen Quaintance's life, and beyond that I know enough to make good in any direction. The whole thing's as plain as a pikestaff, Dirck, and you can see that just as well as I can. We're on to a copper-bottomed cinch, as I told you, and there isn't a leak in it anywhere.

"I'm Stephen Quaintance, and Dominic Seager's done with. There isn't a living soul in the U. S. A. who can contradict me, and all that remains to be done before we can scoop in the pool is to tackle the girl. I'm the fellow for that."

"You'd look foolish if she didn't fancy you," Arendsen put in maliciously and to gain time. He was craftily considering all the pros and cons, estimating expenses and profits, discounting all possible risks. He could almost foresee the moment when he might retire from the dangerous trade he had followed so long, and of late with indifferent results. It was becoming increasingly difficult to find safe carriage for ammunition and guns shipped on false bills of lading, and this looked like a direct interposition of providence on his behalf. By taking it as such he might well retire with the wherewithal to gratify his most extravagant tastes, and he had a varied assortment of these for one who had formerly been a ship's captain.

"What difference would it make?" Seager answered angrily. "You know what women are, Arendsen. I'll find means to have the knot safely tied well within the time limit and whether I happen to hit her fancy or not. You may trust me to waste no time in my wooing, and take it is as gospel that no woman living is going to stand between me and five millions. She may make any conditions she pleases, so long as she marries me. I don't care if I never see her face again after the wedding. I'll disappear and send her a death certificate, so that she'll be free to marry again if she wants to. All she has to do is to go to the registrar's with me, and pocket her share of the money. I'll make it so easy for her that she'll maybe want to keep me—but we'll have to see about that afterwards. The great point at present is to get married without a moment's delay."

"Then why don't you start for Paris at once?" interrupted Arendsen, and the ironical question brought his visitor to the climax of their interview.

"How can I?" he answered irritably, "until you come in with the capital. Cut all bluff out, Arendsen. Let's talk sense. I've put the proposition squarely before you. It's up to you to let me have a couple of thousand dollars. Then I'll owe you ten thousand altogether, and I'll pay you cent per cent. It'll be the easiest hundred thousand you ever touched, and—otherwise you'll get nothing."

Arendsen was still reflecting rapidly. He had a far better idea of the value of money than Seager. He also knew that there was no time to be lost, and did not spend any on futile finessing. The other had perforce come to him as a lamb to the slaughter, and it was a pleasure to bleed him.

"I'll put up one thousand dollars," he said at length, "and not a cent more. It's a sheer speculation, and I'm a fool to part with my money so easily, but I'll risk that much on Stephen Quaintance's note for two millions five hundred thousand, and Dominic Seager's for the eighty thousand you owe me already, with interest at ten per cent.

"Now, listen to me," he went on as Seager glared at him with a ludicrous mixture of rage and amazement. "If you kick, I'll squeal. If you make any bones about it, I'll lock you up. If you do me dirt in the very smallest particular,"—he leaned forward and shook a warning finger in his confederate's face,—"I'll——"

He said no more, but sat back, satisfied. His man was utterly in his power now, and he saw that Dominic Seager had come to an understanding of his position.

"All right, then," assented that worthy in a husky voice and after an interval spent in staring open-mouthed at his oppressor.

"I've told you the fix I'm in, and you're free to squeeze me. But it isn't honest. It isn't honest, Arendsen."

"Tush!" the other retorted, but more pacifically. "You're a fool, my friend, when it comes to figures. If I were in your place I'd see that the girl paid her share of whatever it cost me to raise working capital. Isn't it almost as much for her benefit as yours?"

Seager's face cleared.

"Gad! but you're a hard file," he exclaimed. "What you say's very true, all the same, and I'm not above taking a tip from a friend. She'll have to split expenses with me.

"And now, if you'll count the cash out, I'll give you your notes—I've been practicing Quaintance's signature so that it comes off the pen as readily as my own—and I'll skip across to Cherbourg by the first steamer. Give me back my papers. The girl's address is in one of the letters from these rascally 'Frisco lawyers. It's a pretty good sign that they take me on trust, eh, Arendsen?"

"Except in the matter of cash," Arendsen commented drily.

"I suppose that if they had met your request for a loan I might have waited long enough without seeing you."

"I'd have sent you your eight thousand dollars, I think," Seager answered indifferently, "if only to be out of your debt. You're a dangerous devil, Arendsen. But for that I'd have been here before."

He signed a separate name to each of the documents which his companion had been preparing, pocketed without counting them the notes produced by the latter from the big safe, heard with an air of weariness a final warning as to the horrible fate in store for him if he should play his accomplice false, and, having bidden that individual farewell with the curtest of nods, was escorted downstairs by the inky-faced boy who had introduced him.

"You'll cable me the moment the bond is registered," Arendsen called after him, "and write me by every mail. If I fail to hear from you regularly I'll understand that there's something wrong, and be after you like a shot. We're slack just now, and I can quite easily spare the time for a run across."

"I'll send you the news, sure," Seager called back. He had not failed to comprehend the threat underlying the careless words.

"That fellow's the worst snob I know," he said angrily to himself as he stepped out on to the sidewalk. "He puts on as much dog with me as if I were afraid of him. I'll teach him a lesson as soon as I can afford to set up school. But in the meantime I'll dodge down to Number 9 Broadway, and book my passage."

He turned into Chambers street and took the Elevated, chuckling to think of the change in his circumstances since he had come shivering down in the surface car, and, when next morning, Arendsen rang up the steamship office to ask whether a berth had yet been reserved for Stephen Quaintance, he was politely informed that that gentleman had made all arrangements, and was then on the point of sailing for Paris.

CHAPTER IX

SWEET ARE THE USES OF ADVERTISEMENT

The spurious Stephen Quaintance thus successfully launched on his nefarious enterprise, and the man whose empty place in the world he meant to usurp firm in his resolve to have nothing whatever to do with the dead Miles Quaintance's project or the money it would produce, time ticked away five full days of the few that were left before the twelve months should be up and the dead man's adopted daughter become entitled to all those millions.

The real Stephen Quaintance felt safely assured that the strange precautions he had taken for her welfare would in due course result satisfactorily for her and himself. He had paid a long price, at his own discretion, for the right to live his own life, to follow out his own ambitions. He had only one aim now, and it engrossed him entirely, to the exclusion of all other interests.

He had spent these days in an exhaustive but fruitless search of the Long Island suburbs, where it seemed just possible that the girl whom he meant to marry might have her home. The only faint clue he possessed was that afforded by the rat-faced Frenchman's appearance at Rockaway Beach, very vaguely confirmed by what he had overheard from his own offensive namesake at the Cornucopia Club.

The Night and Day Bank had notified him that the funds which it had collected for him were now freely at his disposal, and he had paid for the car in which he roamed the countryside, with an especially keen eye to the multitudinous runabouts he met on his many excursions. Once, at O'Ferral's behest, he had taken Cornoyer with him, but that volatile youth's seemingly irrepressible spirits and equally inexhaustible talent for getting into mischief, did not induce him to repeat the experiment. Until he should have achieved success in his quest he would not be in any mood for making merry. And while he was in such a state of mind it suited him best to be quite alone.

There were now and then moments when the magnitude of the task he had undertaken depressed him, but, none the less, he was fixed in his purpose to persevere. However it had come about, he was altogether obsessed by the memory of a girl's face. And even while he, on occasion, chafed against its sudden, mysterious potency of influence over his actions, while he was still sane enough to realize that he might never see it again, he was determined that, if it should end so, he should not have to blame himself for any failure or remissness.

On the evening of the fifth day's futile pilgrimage he passed, preoccupied, down Broadway, from the garage at which he kept his car to the Fifth Avenue Hotel where he had made his permanent headquarters, trying in vain to evolve some more likely scheme of search. The possibility of employing a detective agency had, of course, occurred to him, but he had dismissed it at once and for good, so repugnant was it all to his ideas. There seemed to be nothing for it but to cover every inch of Manhattan, and then try elsewhere if that produced no result. He must be thorough in all his methods.

A bell-boy caught sight of him as he entered the vestibule of the hotel, and, knowing him always liberal in his acknowledgment of such service, brought him word that there was a telephone message awaiting him, which turned out to be from O'Ferral, and merely said,

"See to-night's *Telegram*, page nine, second column, ad. twenty-five."

He hurried back to the door and bought a *Telegram* from the newsboy there, spread it out on a desk within, and, running his finger rapidly down the column prescribed, whose caption was "Automobiles, &c.," found advertisement twenty-five as follows:

> "For Sale, Cadillac, Model Q., '06, two-seated, with hood. In perfect running order. $450. Apply 3996, Telegram."

With these words firmly fixed in his memory he made for the 'phone at speed and called up O'Ferral. But the correspondent was not at home, and neither was he to be heard of at the editorial offices of the paper on whose staff he served. Quaintance therefore sat down to compose a reply to the advertisement. It was difficult to convey neither too much nor too little, with the grave risk hanging over his head that some other purchaser might anticipate him, that the advertiser might even ignore his communication. But he finally solved the problem of what to say, what to leave unsaid, had a special messenger take the resultant epistle by hand to its destination rather than trust the mails, and went off much elated to dine with Cornoyer at Rector's, whom he surprised by his hitherto unsuspected fund of good fellowship.

Later in the evening he again called up O'Ferral's rooms, and this time it was the correspondent himself who answered the 'phone.

"H'lo, Steve," said he. "Get my message?"

"I did. I've sent in an answer already. How did you happen across the ad.?"

O'Ferral laughed.

"Faculty of observation again, I suppose," came the cheery reply. "Hope you'll have luck with it, Steve. I'm only sorry I can't do better than that to help you. I'm off to-morrow."

"The devil you are!" A long pause. "When d'you think you'll be back?"

"No idea at all. Wish I had! And, say, Steve. Don't tell anyone that I'm out of town. No, not even Cornoyer. Keep an eye on him for me. He's not a bad sort when you know him. Must ring off now. Good-bye, Steve."

"Good-bye, old chap, and the best of luck. Let me know here when you return."

"Right."

Quaintance hung up the receiver sorrowfully. He would be still more lonely without O'Ferral, and of late the feeling of loneliness had grown upon him. He was no longer quietly content with the company of an unknown multitude. His views in that respect had undergone a notable change since the afternoon on which he had first walked up Fifth Avenue on his return from exile. For two more long days he scoured the country without avail, and waited, with all the patience which he could muster, an answer to his modest request that the owner of the Cadillac advertised for sale would not on any account part with it before affording him an opportunity of inspection.

Returning from a very dusty pilgrimage on the second of these, fortune favored him with a little encouragement, trifling enough but none the less to be accepted thankfully, in the shape of a business-like note to say that F. Smith would be glad to show him the Cadillac car any afternoon he might care to call. The address given was near Stormport, Long Island, and there were full directions for reaching it.

He opened his map and picked out Stormport among the tiny villages on the north shore of Peconic Bay. Then he looked at the letter again and frowned as he studied the crabbed hand-writing, which might have been either man's or woman's, on the sheet of cheap note-paper. On the whole, he was much inclined to doubt whether the car would be what he wanted. But, at the same time, he meant to see both it and F. Smith. He would not let any chance, however remote, escape him.

He set forth for Stormport early next morning, and made such speed on his journey that he came near to involving himself with the lawful authorities on that score before he had come to the more open roads where there were no plain-clothes policemen.

He had a perfect day for his expedition. A cool sea-breeze was sweeping across the Island and kept the dust down. He got to Riverhead, clean and comfortable, in good time for lunch and conscious of a keen appetite. When he went on again, at an easy pace and with a fragrant cigar to temper the tang of the salt air which grew ever stronger as he caught more frequent glimpses of the grey water, he was at peace with the world about him, even optimistic as to his prospects therein. It was in such circumstances, under the clean, clear sky, among green, open fields set with deep, dusky woods and thickets all scented of the sea, that he would fain have met the lady of his dreams.

He had just time to finish his cigar ere, having passed through sleepy Stormport and wheeled round into a country road, he came to the stretch of plantation described in the letter, crossed a narrow creek by a rickety bridge, and so reached an almost untrodden track leading through the trees toward the shore. Into that he turned at haphazard, and creeping cautiously forward, became aware of a tiny octagonal bungalow all but concealed from sight by the thick foliage, a small barn set somewhat apart from it at one side of the path he was following. He sounded his horn to herald his coming and drew up before a low porch at which the path stopped.

It was very still and restful there in the shadow, with nothing to break its cloistral quiet but the music of wild birds, the crooning of the soft tide on an unseen beach. Amid such setting, he thought, the girl would have seemed at home. But she did not come forth as he had almost prayed that she would, and he was not aware of the scrutiny to which he was being subjected during his day-dream. When he at length got out and knocked, the door was reluctantly opened to him by a hard-featured, elderly woman who might have been either mistress or maid in that modest establishment, who bore no faintest resemblance to her he had half hoped to see.

She was dressed in black, with a light shawl about her shoulders, a cap on her closely confined grey hair. She stood there with folded arms, lips compressed, sharp eyes fixed interrogatively on the stranger, her whole attitude telling plainly enough her desire to be informed as to his business and settle that in the shortest possible time.

"My name is Qu——Newman," said he, rather lamely and gulping his disappointment down. "I had a note from F. Smith about a small car that's for sale here."

"Come this way, please," the woman requested, speaking with a strong foreign accent and yet as one who had full command of the English tongue. She closed the door carefully, and, stepping down from the porch, led him back toward the barn he had passed. He followed respectfully, but with small expectation of gaining any great solace from her society. She seemed to be bent on exhibiting an extreme detachment from any personal interest in him.

She drew a key from the business-like chatelaine at her belt, unlocked the barn-door and slid that aside with an ease which bespoke much more strength of arm than he would have given her credit for, passed within and produced the identical runabout which Quaintance had seen at Martin's. He recognized it at once and a more minute survey confirmed his first instantaneous impression. It fitted in every respect the description O'Ferral had supplied him with, and, if anything had been wanting in way of evidence, there was a small grey gauntlet peeping forth from a fold of the hood. He had great difficulty in repressing the exclamation of joy which had almost escaped his lips.

"Ahem!" said he, so noisily that the woman looked her astonishment.

"Does it—who—are you Mrs. Smith?" he asked in confusion, and not knowing very well what to say next.

She nodded, and, folding her arms again, watched unwinkingly while he walked round it.

"I—surely I've seen this car somewhere before," he remarked tentatively, rising from an inspection of the rear tires, and regarding her from behind the hood.

"There are many of the same make," she replied very shortly, and her lips snapped together again.

"I think it was this one," he maintained, and she let his contention pass without either assent or contradiction. He found her niggardliness of speech highly aggravating.

A bright thought suddenly struck him. He made a most workmanlike examination of every vital part.

"Is four-fifty the lowest you'll take?" he asked, for the sake of appearance, and she relaxed her air of detachment a little.

"It is worth more," she said, with the first sign of feeling she had yet shown, a faint expression of anxiety in her eyes. "It is worth more. I would not be willing to take less, and I ask so little because I desire to sell it at once."

"All right, then," he answered. "I'll take it. If you will allow me to write you a cheque and let me have your receipt we can call the deal square."

But the suggestion did not seem to meet with her approval either. She glanced toward the closed door under the porch, and again at him.

"If you will let me have the cheque when you come or send for the car, that will be sufficient," she differed. "Then I will give a receipt also."

Quaintance smiled inwardly. He had foreseen as much.

"I mean to take it away with me now, if I may," he said pleasantly. "My car will tow it with ease, and—"

She made up her mind to accept the inevitable, although with ill enough grace.

"There's only the kitchen," she said doubtfully, but turned toward it without further speech.

He followed her dumbly, well pleased, through the porch into a small square room, which, except for the cook-stove, might have served for parlor, so comfortably was it furnished, so dainty were all its appointments. She crossed it, in haste to close the door which led through to a room adjoining, but not before he had caught a quick glimpse of its interior also. And what he saw there caused him to draw a deep breath of contentment.

It was a sunny, pleasant chamber, with a wide window looking out to sea and a low couch thereat, upon which lay the self-same hat the girl had worn at Martin's. But she herself was nowhere visible.

The grey-haired woman set a chair beside the table, laid pen and ink before him. He drew a well-filled note-case from one pocket, and, opening that to get his check-book out, found, as he had known he would, that he might more conveniently pay cash for his new purchase. The woman looked well pleased when he explained that to her, and sat down in his place, as soon as he had counted out the necessary bills, to write him a receipt.

When she had handed him that, it would have appeared that he had no excuse for lingering, but he had yet one more card to play.

"On second thoughts," he remarked as he moved toward the door, "I'll ask you to keep the small car for me till to-morrow, if you'll be so good."

It was a simple enough request, but seemed to perplex her afresh.

"Will you come for it yourself, or send?" she asked quickly.

"I'll come."

"At what time?"

"Whenever it is most convenient to you."

"At this hour then, and not later than to-morrow," she agreed grudgingly.

"It is not that I would be disobliging," she added in haste, "but ——"

"You have placed me under an obligation," Quaintance assured her. "I shall be punctual—at this hour, to-morrow."

He bowed, and, as he stepped down from the porch, she closed the door from within. He could hear a bolt shot behind him, and was glad that she had not waited to watch him go. Half way down the track, and well out of sight of the little embowered dwelling, he backed his big motor carefully into the thicket between two trees which allowed him space and no more for that purpose, drew the green screen close again to conceal it, and went on toward the road afoot. He could not intrude further meantime on the jealously guarded privacy of the bungalow, but he knew no valid reason why he should deny himself a glimpse of it from the shore at a safely respectful distance.

Appeasing his conscience by means of such reasoning, he turned along the road, to his left, and followed it for a short quarter-mile, when he once more took to the wood, turning left again toward the sea, threading his way through the tangle of undergrowth in the thick belt of trees till he came suddenly upon a narrow curve of sand with the wide waters of the bay lying blue beyond it. And at the same instant the faint, far echo of a most plaintive melody thrilled his attentive ears.

He stopped and hearkened, his pulses hammering. The tender notes which swelled and ebbed on the uncertain breeze came from no bird's throat. Some one was singing, some one hidden from sight behind the sandpit that formed one horn of the half-moon sweep of shore on which he had emerged. The bungalow lay unseen beyond the other. He stood between it and the singer.

It had been his intention to saunter unconcernedly back past that shrine, brave, if need were, its guardian's resentment, but now he saw, very clearly and all at once, that any such trespass would be unpardonable, that it would be only mannerly to turn the other way. He did so, strolling with an assumption of all the innocence at his command toward the low ridge which shut him in on that side. And, crossing it, absent-mindedly, hands clasped behind him, head bent as if in deep meditation, stopped suddenly, looked about him in well simulated surprise.

CHAPTER X

THE SEA-BIRD'S CRY THAT CAME FROM THE CREEK

The wide blue waters of the bay were flecked with white-caps called up here and there by the uncertain breeze which whipped across it from the hills of Shinnecock, asleep in the dim distance with their backs to the Atlantic. The rising tide lapped lazily on a white scimitar of sand. Behind the beach stood its long screen of woodland, dense, many-tinted, shutting the world out. And overhead, a sapphire sky held no least cloud.

There were no sails in sight, nor was there any sign of life along the shore save for the man who stood there speechlessly, unnoticed, the girl whose velvet voice was blending low and liquidly with the susurrus of the undergrowth. It was a folk-song of the South that she was singing, an old-time ode of the plantations which brought back to her solitary auditor many and poignant memories. Its crooning chorus thrilled chords in his heart long mute, almost forgotten in life's changes. His eyes grew misty, a fog gripped his throat, so bitter-sweet was it to hear them once more thus.

The singing ceased. He started, looking up in dire confusion. He had been caught red-handed, eavesdropping, a crime for which there could be no excuse. The girl had turned, was gazing at him in astonishment and yet from under level eyebrows. It might be that he could still make apologies such as should serve to stave off or at least appease her righteous indignation.

He looked her in the face, because her feet were bare, and she was standing ankle-deep in the warm water of a shallow creek which cut a broad swath through the sand there. She had been stooping slightly when she sang, searching for something in the shoal, her back toward him.

But her sweet eyes still held him spell-bound for a space, and, when he in the end found speech, he stammered stupidly, his own face flushed. Had it been feasible he would fain have turned back, and come to her again after he had recovered his composure. But to have done so then might have cost him his anxiously sought opportunity. That he must seize and make the most of. He clutched at courage, desperate, and spoke.

"I—I—I beg your pardon," he said, bowing with deepest deference. "I—I didn't know that the beach was impassable here. I—I'm afraid I startled you?"

She had been scanning him closely while he stood bare-headed before her in the mellow sunshine, had known at once that he was the same man she had seen in Martin's, and her recollections of him had been none but grateful. This it was, perhaps, which influenced her to answer him pleasantly rather than rebuff him with a chill courtesy as she might otherwise have felt impelled to do.

"The creek comes as a surprise the first time one turns this corner," she said, and her lips parted slightly in a swift, fugitive smile as she looked down to where, in the ripple, two ivory feet were half imbedded among the sand. Then she stepped ashore and a swirl of her skirts sent them out of sight altogether.

"I dropped a bracelet coming across," she explained in a matter of fact tone, and Quaintance was conscious that fortune beyond his wildest hopes had befallen him. He would find that never sufficiently to be commended bangle for her if he should have to spend the rest of his life there. He had already sat down, was untying his shoes.

"There's a bridge not very far up," she advised him gratuitously, but he was deaf to the hint. His way was clear to him now and he had all his wits about him again.

"I know," he replied. "I came across it an hour ago. I was on my way to the bungalow on this side, to look at a motor."

He considered a moment, wondering whether he dared. And he did.

"It's yours, isn't it?" he asked courageously, rising.

She nodded careless assent, but corrected herself in words.

"Mrs. Smith's," she asserted indifferently. She was waiting until he should go on his way, to resume her search.

"Whereabouts did you drop the bracelet?" he questioned, but she shook her head.

"Oh, I can easily find it myself," she demurred. "You mustn't trouble about it. I thought you were merely going to cross the creek."

He turned and entered the water, leaving shoes and socks behind him. His purpose was sufficiently evident. He had conveyed to her that protest would be superfluous. She had no option but to acquiesce, and did so with a little *moue,* half petulent, half amused. Which he did not see, since his back was toward her now.

"I've no idea where it may be," she warned him contradictorily. "I only noticed its loss when I sat down to pull on—when I returned to this side."

"Don't fret," he answered cheerfully. "I'll find it for you."

She smiled again, half pleased, half displeased. He was so big and strong—so self-confident. A woman's intuition had told her that she might trust him. She prized the missing ornament for much more than its intrinsic value. As soon as he should have found it—and she had already spent a full half-hour on such quest—she would thank him properly, and proceed. But to do so she must first resume her discarded foot-gear.

She slipped to the back of a bush at the edge of the thicket, and, hoping he had not caught sight of the silken hose she had left hanging there, was back on the beach before he looked round again, with two points of polished tan peeping forth from under her skirt as the wind caressed her.

"I'm too far down," he called to her, noticing the light imprints of her small feet where she had reached dry land on the other bank, and from there he retraced his steps, slowly, searching on either hand.

"It may have sunk out of sight in the sand," he said as he reached her side again, and paused to refresh himself with a swift glance at her mirthful eyes. These had strange, heart-stirring lights in their irises now, sapphire-blue like the sky, turquoise of the sea, tender tints as of wild wood-violets.

"I hope not," she answered demurely, and the dancing lights died down in the shadow of the long lashes which had encurtained them.

"It wouldn't matter at all if it had," he assured her convincingly. "I'll dig it out though it's half-way through to Ceylon."

She was smiling outright now.

"Are you always so successful?" she asked, and he thought that something of challenge lurked behind the straightforward question.

"Always," he replied with a whimsical gravity whereat she laughed aloud.

"How pleasant that must be—for you," she said lightly.

"Success is certainly pleasanter than defeat," he admitted, and faced about, leaving her, a little abruptly, having no further commonplace at his command, not yet daring to give voice to any more personal speech.

She was so altogether adorable as she stood there before him, straight and slender and fearless, the sea-wind kissing her wild-rose cheeks, the sun playing hide and seek with the lights and shadows among her tresses, that he could not trust himself at the moment to look her straight in the eyes again. And he would no more look furtively at her. Wherefore he occupied himself for a space with the ostensible object of their joint interest.

But, turn up the sand as he might, the missing armlet was not forthcoming, and, having crossed and recrossed the creek half a dozen times, he sat down with a great air of exhaustion, not too far from where she was leaning against the grass-grown bank which dropped from the belt of wood to the shore.

"I bought Mrs. Smith's car," he said casually, having once more recovered full use of his faculties.

"Oh, did you?" she exclaimed. "I'm glad—because she wanted to dispose of it. You'll find it a good little car."

"I'm sure I shall," he agreed, grateful that she approved the proceeding.

"I've been wondering," he went on, with a quick inspiration, "whether I might perhaps be permitted to leave it with—Mrs. Smith, until I move down here. I'm living at the Fifth Avenue in Manhattan at present, and I've another car there. It would be a great convenience to me if I could get her to make some use of it, and so keep it in tune till——"

"I'm afraid she couldn't consent to such an arrangement," the girl said quietly.

"I'm staying with Mrs. Smith," she added, "and so I know most of her plans."

Thus nonplussed, Quaintance could not well pursue that subject, and a glance upward, to see whether his suggestion had caused her any offence, almost cost him his self-control again.

"This is a charming spot," he said, somewhat lamely, feeling it very hard that he should have to limit himself to such banalities while words of so much more import were on the tip of his tongue. But he realized that he could not be too cautious in his walk and conduct on this occasion, when the least slip might lose him all he had so far won from Dame Fortune, and maybe more. He had no illusions as to Mrs. Smith's probable opinion of his behavior, and could not afford a single false step lest he forfeit his precarious standing with the girl as well.

"Very," she replied easily. "I'm very fond of it."

"I love it," he averred with great fervor, and got up suddenly to resume operations.

He had almost asked her whether she did not prefer it to such scenes as that in which they had first encountered each other, in Martin's, but recollected in time that she probably would not care to be reminded of that incident. Later on, when they should have learned to know each other better, when she should have become accustomed to meeting him as a near neighbor, there would be time enough to clear up the vague atmosphere of mystery which still encompassed her. He had already decided that he must settle down in Stormport, as close to the bungalow as he could find a roof to shelter him, and, at the moment, the best way to her good graces would be forthwith to find the bracelet. That it was which must constitute an enduring link between them.

"Did you go far beyond the other edge of the creek?" he asked briskly, adventuring a brief glance at her from the brink. "Are you quite sure that you dropped it in the water?"

A sea-bird cried shrilly from the marsh beyond the bridge, hidden from sight by the intervening trees, and at the sound she started aghast, her eyes dilated. He could sympathize with her alarm, for the long, wailing note, rising unexpectedly from that silent solitude, had been sufficiently disconcerting.

"I went straight along the sand to the point," she said hurriedly, "and sat down for a little there. Perhaps it dropped on dry land after all."

"I'd better make sure that it didn't before I begin to make the dirt fly here," he suggested. "It won't take ten minutes to do so, and may save us time in the long run. If not, I'll begin dredging operations in earnest as soon as I get back."

She nodded concurrence, and, as he set off on his errand, the sea-bird cried again from the creek.

He traced the impress of two bare feet step by step to the further spit, and then round the corner to where she had sat looking out to sea. Close research there at length brought the bracelet to light. It lay half buried beside a heap of white sand with which she had been amusing herself, trickling it through her taper fingers. A print of her hand appeared where she had patted the pyramid into shape, and Quaintance stooped down a second time to lay his great fist reverently on it.

As he hurried back to her with his find he could not help turning it over, and there on the inside of the broad gold band with the broken chain which had let it slip from her slender wrist was the one word, "Dagmar."

"Dagmar," he said to himself, and the name sounded musically in his ears. It was such as he would have chosen for her, and became her blonde beauty as none other would. It might well be that she had the blood of some old sea-king in her veins, so gently dignified was she, so queenly. He looked for her eagerly, to apprise her of his success, but she was not anywhere visible, and, when he had once more splashed through the rapidly rising creek, in the certainty that she must be ensconced in the shade of the bushes on the other side, it was only to find the spot at which he had left her untenanted. She had no doubt got tired of waiting, and so started homewards.

That did not in the least disturb Quaintance's equanimity. On the contrary rather, since it afforded him fair excuse for further effort on his own behalf. He had now a golden key to the shrine in which he aspired to find footing, and no dragon guardian need seek to deprive him thereof. He would deliver the bracelet to its rightful owner and to none other. He whistled blithely while he donned socks and shoes, sang as he started along the shore toward the bungalow at a smart pace.

As he approached the small clearing within which it stood looking seaward but hidden from him by a clump of trees, he fell silent again, and was glad of that presently. For, when he came within sight of it, rounding the corner where a little lawn was walled in by the thicket, he saw a man with his back to him staring intently at a shuttered window, whereupon he himself drew back into cover. He had no intention of interviewing a man, and would rather wait till the coast was clear before calling.

The individual who had unwittingly come between him and his plans did not seem to be satisfied with the shutter. He tried it two or three times to see whether it was securely fastened inside, tapped it with the cane he was carrying, cried to those within some words whose import did not reach Quaintance's ears. Then he repeated the process at the next window, which was also closely covered, and so disappeared round the octagon, while Quaintance, much perturbed by his presence, slipped noiselessly after him through the thicket to see whether he would go indoors. If he did, thought Quaintance, it might be as well to postpone his own visit until the morrow or such more auspicious occasion as providence might provide.

It fell out, however, that the other passed the porch and went sauntering down the track which led to the public road, only pausing to light a cigar, after which he quickened his pace perceptibly. And Quaintance, having assured himself that he had really gone, felt grateful to him for going. It had not been possible to see much of his appearance, but he might be set down as a man of about thirty, was wearing a light tweed suit and a panama, had a flower in his buttonhole, and carried a cane with much silver about it. He was well proportioned and comely. His carriage was smart, almost military. He might turn out to be a dangerous rival.

In any case Quaintance was glad to have seen the last of him for the time being, and, stepping out into the track himself, turned back toward the porch as though he had come from the beach by the same path he had followed thither. He knocked at the door, and, while he waited, fortified himself in his resolve not to be cajoled out of the bracelet by Mrs. Smith. But no one opened to him, and he knocked again, with a like result.

A swift suspicion invaded his mind. He hammered upon the panel in front of him, and even that failed to elicit any response from within. With a sinking heart he walked round the building. All its windows were shuttered. The bungalow was deserted.

He groaned disgustedly. That, then, was why the other had been so assiduous in his investigations. And what was he, Quaintance, going to do now? The bungalow had evidently been vacated for good. There was nothing to be gained by standing there gaping at it. He must hurry into Stormport, and there make such inquiry as he might regarding its recent inmates. It was still his obvious duty to deliver the bracelet into its owner's hands.

He made for his automobile in haste, half hoping that he might still overtake the travelers before their train should have left the station. Failing that he would learn more to-morrow when he came back for the runabout. But how was he to obtain possession of that if they had gone off for good! Mrs. Smith's idea of a square deal seemed elementary in the extreme!

Utterly disconcerted, he turned into the tangle within which he had secreted his car, and received a still more distressing shock, for the car was no longer there.

CHAPTER XI

MRS. SMITH'S IDEA OF A SQUARE DEAL

Fanchette had raised no objections when her young mistress had spoken of selling the runabout, since it seemed that, otherwise, they would soon be reduced to dire straits. Count as she might, there were but twenty dollars left in the oaken coffer which was their only available treasury since Jules Chevrel had despoiled them of their small balance in the New York bank. And further forcible argument in favor of the sale was that furnished by the week's bills which she settled in Stormport on Saturday. It proved most convincingly that twenty dollars would not last them long.

On Sunday, therefore, they definitely decided to advertise the car which had been such a source of pleasure to both of them. Fanchette had very often accompanied the girl on her excursions, and had even become, under her tuition, a fairly expert mechanic. Now all she had to solace her was the thought that, since Jules Chevrel was no further away than New York, it would not have been safe for either of them to be seen about so openly. The dread that the Frenchman would yet discover their whereabouts was always with her, and she even feared that their modest advertisement might bring undesirable visitors to the bungalow.

Of the half dozen envelopes which came to them from the newspaper office, five were circulars from agencies and salesrooms, and only the sixth seemed to hold out any hope of business resulting. It was dated from the Fifth Avenue Hotel, subscribed by A. Newman, conveyed no just cause for suspicion as to its good faith, and Fanchette answered it according to the girl's dictation, signing herself, for politic reasons, F. Smith, a free translation of Fanchette Lefevre. She was known as F. Smith in Stormport, the bungalow was rented to her in that name, and her charge passed colloquially as "the Smith woman's boarder."

Their tenancy of the tiny dwelling expired at the end of that month, and, after having despatched her reply, Fanchette devoted herself to packing up their belongings, as some precaution against any hostile movement in their direction. It was for the girl that she feared, and she was devoted body and soul to her mistress, would fight for her to the last ditch.

For these reasons she received Quaintance with a distrust which was somewhat too evident, although it must be conceded that his subsequent behavior afforded her justification. In the first place he seemed disappointed to see her, as though he had half expected to see some one else, and, while she was still congratulating herself on the fact that the girl had gone off to the beach, he stumbled over the name he gave. Then he asked idle questions, appeared to be interested in the car's recent movements rather than in its actual efficiency, which was what he had come there to determine. She was almost tempted to turn him away before he at last proceeded with his inspection and so, to some extent, lulled her doubts.

It was no slight relief to her when he decided to buy the car, but that again was detracted from by his invasion of their tiny stronghold and his vacillation as to when he would take delivery of his purchase. She did not quite know what to make of him in the end. His appearance was all in his favor, and he looked too frank a gentleman to act as a spy in their camp. But, none the less, Fanchette, who trusted nothing in trousers, followed him as he departed, for all that she had ostensibly bolted the door behind him.

When he backed the big touring car in among the trees half way down the track her distrust increased. It was evident that he had come there with double intention of some sort. She shadowed him through the thicket as far as the road, and stayed there on watch under cover while he turned along toward the creek.

After he disappeared she stood undecided whether to walk as far as the bend and see if he had crossed the bridge on his way to Stormport, or to take to the shore in search of her mistress, but that was determined for her by the approach of a second pedestrian, who came into view precisely where she had lost sight of the other, at a point where the road zigzags to avoid a marsh. Fanchette knew him at once, and all her worst fears were confirmed, for he was none other than their arch-enemy, source of their every misfortune.

To fly from him would have been futile since he had found out their poor secret. She stayed where she was, in hiding, and watched him as he drew nearer. Her face was pale now, her lips moved tremulously, although, to be fair to the oncomer, there was nothing to terrify her in his outward appearance.

He was a man of medium height, a young man, about thirty, wearing a light tweed suit and a panama. He had a flower in his buttonhole, and carried a cane with much silver about it. His features were dark, and most women would have described them as handsome, but a man, a man of the world especially, would have discovered about them the ugly stamp left by evil living. At any rate they were very well moulded and regular, like the white teeth which showed when he smiled. He was smiling now.

Fanchette augered no good from that fact. She was staring out at him from under the leaves with despair in her eyes, and, when he came to the narrow track leading through the trees to the bungalow, he halted there, almost opposite her.

"*Peste!*" said he aloud, looking down it as far as was possible, speaking quick French. "Where does that path lead to? A field, no doubt. What human being would live in such wilds! Forward, then, Etienne, *mon brave gar!* We've the whole afternoon to devote to our search. There will be time enough to explore this later, if need be."

He passed on, and Fanchette still stared, but it was at his back now. Her pale lips parted and the breath came quickly through them. Her bosom heaved. She started, as if from a trance, crossed herself, wrung her hands, and fled swiftly toward the bungalow.

Half-way up the lane she paused, a desperate scheme of escape already afloat in her mind. There was only the stranger's motor, and—her need was very urgent. In it lay a last rash resort, the sole, slender thread of hope that she might yet save the situation and with every chance against her.

"Heaven help us if I'm caught at it!" said Fanchette, and pushed through the branches behind which the big car was hidden.

In action she soon recovered her self-command, became once more cool and resourceful. The possibility of success in such enterprise was of the slightest, but, be the upshot what it might, she was ready to run the risk. She drove the big touring-car up to the porch, managing it without difficulty, and left it there while she was preparing for flight. In case its owner should return inopportunely she could explain to him that it had been unsafe where he had left it.

It did not take ten minutes to finish the light packing left to be done, and, having dragged the heavy baggage as far as the kitchen, she set shutters on the windows, working with method, at her best speed. She was wonderfully active for a woman of her years, and excitement lent her added strength. When all was ready for the road she loaded the car up, its folding seats allowing her space sufficient. The entire personal property of the bungalow's two inmates was much less bulky than it might have been.

At the crucial moment, she remembered that she must leave word for the owner of the car, lest he should think she had stolen it outright. She sat down, trembling with nervous impatience, and penned a hurried note, assuring him that it would be safely returned to him at his hotel in Manhattan, imploring him to excuse the liberty which she had perforce taken, telling him that the key of the barn in which the runabout was housed might be found hanging in the outer porch. In it, she thought, he might well reach New York, and, on the whole, he would not be excessively inconvenienced.

This she left in an envelope transfixed to a tree-trunk where he could not but catch sight of it when he came for his car, and drove on with the keys of the empty bungalow on the seat beside her. These she would leave in Stormport. And the house was clean as a new pin. There need be no notoriety or unpleasantness about their departure—if they were only allowed to depart.

Her heart was thumping audibly as she slowed down to take the turn into the public road, and she felt sure she must scream if she should discover any man on the open stretch there. It was empty, and she gulped down a great, dry sob as she sped forward recklessly, knowing that it was now too late to falter or turn back. She took the curves at a dangerous pace, scarcely using the horn in case it should attract unfriendly attention, and, as she stopped at the roadside before the bridge, sent a long, wailing cry ringing shorewards, the call of a sea-bird which she had learned as a child on the rocks of La Roche-Segur.

She had taught her young mistress that, in prevision of just such mischance. If only the girl should have heard it, all might yet go well. So far everything had turned out in her favor, and she must rely on its carrying power for the final accomplishment of her bold project. She repressed her increasing disquiet with a great effort, and, after an interval, uttered the cry again.

A few moments later she caught sight of a white dress moving rapidly through the near thicket in her direction, and presently the girl emerged, faintly flushed, somewhat breathless, and gravely alarmed, but collected enough.

"What is it, Fanchette?" she cried as she came to the edge of the road and looked out to where the other was beckoning her to make still more haste.

"It is Monsieur!" Fanchette replied without waste of words. "He is here. I saw him myself. We must fly. Will you take the wheel from me. My eyes——"

The girl jumped in beside her and threw an arm round her neck, regardless of her own interests in her quick sympathy with the other's overstrung tears.

"Poor Fanchette!" she said soothingly, and the hard-featured maid recovered herself at once under the stress of their dire necessity.

"Let us go on," she implored. "There is not a moment to lose. All I have to tell you will hear by the way, and meantime let us go on."

The girl slipped obediently into the driving seat. She must trust herself to the other's guidance, since she herself was quite in the dark as to everything except the broad fact that Monsieur was in the near neighborhood, hard on their trail. And that spur was more than sufficient.

"Whither, Fanchette?" she asked.

"Through Stormport, to leave the keys, and then to New York."

They were into the village before there was time for any further remark, and out again at the extreme limit of legal speed. The high-powered car purred softly as its fair driver gave it its head by degrees until it was stretching out to its work in earnest. Fanchette sat stiffly with her hands folded in front of her, turning over in her own mind the possible consequences of crime, seeking some plan to save her mistress scatheless, but by no means penitent. The girl crouched over the wheel, her sombrely sparkling eyes all intent on her own task.

Reaching Riverhead, they had to slow down, and, having passed safely through its long, sleepy street, Fanchette drew a deep breath of relief.

"You are sure it was Monsieur himself?" her companion asked suddenly. "Did he have speech with you, Fanchette? Tell me what has happened. I can't understand."

"I was at the end of the path, at the roadside, when he passed by," Fanchette answered, "but he did not see me. He thought it looked too rough to lead to a house, and went further on. But he will be back at the bungalow before dark."

The girl gave vent to a tired sigh, and her proud head drooped. But she soon bethought herself again of their strange position.

"And this car, Fanchette?" she inquired, looking over her shoulder. "Where did it come from?"

"I borrowed it," replied Fanchette briefly. "I am to return it to its owner as soon as we reach New York."

She compressed her lips, determined to part with no further explanation on that point, but the precaution was needless. Her charge was accustomed to taking a good deal for granted when Fanchette assumed control, and results had always justified her in her confidence.

"What are you going to do when we get there?" she asked reflectively, and Fanchette swiftly unfolded the scheme she had formed.

"I think," she suggested, "that, while Monsieur is in this country, we should hasten back to Paris that you may obtain the money you still have left in the bank there. It will be easy enough to withdraw it in person, while he is absent. And, with it, you will be free to return to America, or you might live in England at less expense, or——. There are other countries also. If we go at once, there will be the less risk, and we can learn in Paris when he is expected back, so that we may be elsewhere before he arrives."

"That seems a good plan," the girl agreed wearily.

"And we might go on to London from Paris. It should surely be possible to bury oneself there. I've paid a long price for my folly, Fanchette, and you've paid heavily too. I don't know what I'd be doing without you. Life wouldn't be worth living now, if I were entirely alone."

Fanchette fondled the white hand on the steering-wheel.

"I shall always be mademoiselle's to command," she replied with a tender formality meant to conceal the wistful affection which was making her voice tremble. And, having thus mapped out their immediate future, they both fell silent again.

Mile after mile dropped away from the whirring wheels, and Fanchette felt ever more confident that her appeal to the owner of the providential car had not failed of good effect. She had been dumbly dreading that, somewhere along the road, a policeman would spring out and stop them, bid them turn back to Stormport and take him with them. In which case she could but admit that she was thief and a robber, beg that her innocent mistress should be allowed to proceed by train to the city. But, as dusk settled over the open landscape, she plucked up heart, and when, after a fast run, they had driven unharmed through the lighted streets of Jamaica, she had almost discounted the possibility that they might still be held up at the ferry ahead of them.

She was the more dismayed, therefore, when a man hailed them as they drove into the dock and stooped down to identify the registered number in front of the car. She had thrown the rug from her knees in readiness to descend and be marched off to prison, when he came forward holding out a yellow envelope, which, she felt sure, must be legal warrant for her arrest.

"For Miss Dagmar," he announced briefly, and, having handed it to that astonished damsel, made off without more ado.

There was no time to open it then, and, while they crept forward on to the ferry, Fanchette made full confession of her misdeed.

"Jump out and leave me now, ma'mselle," she begged in conclusion as they came to a standstill on deck. "Here is the money I got for you, four hundred and fifty dollars. You must escape with the crowd at the other side, and leave me to explain matters to the police."

The girl looked grave, and made no reply until she had opened the envelope. The message it held merely said:

"I have found your bracelet. Please leave word where I may deliver it. Hope you have had a pleasant run. Newman."

She read that out to Fanchette, and then had to confess her own encounter with the car's owner, so that, in view of his unexpected urbanity under grave grievance, neither had any fault to find with the other, and both were inwardly prepossessed by the tact he had displayed in a position which could not but have been most aggravating to him.

Fanchette's fears thus finally dissipated she even ventured to justify herself in her evil-doing, and the girl did not contradict her assertion that, in any case, all had turned out for the very best. She herself was thinking of the strong, sun-tanned face, of the fearless but very appealing brown eyes she had left behind on the beach, wondering what the man who was always successful would say if he could hear her own sad story of failure. And she did not crumple the telegram up, but kept it smooth and carried it to the hotel with her.

She drove along Twenty-ninth street to the Martha Washington, and, leaving Fanchette to look to the baggage, sat down at a desk to pen a reply. Fanchette took that and the car to the Fifth Avenue Hotel, where she entrusted both to the guardian of the Twenty-fourth street entrance, who willingly took charge of them after he had recovered from his first astonishment at sight of such an unusual chauffeur. When she got back to Twenty-ninth street, she found her mistress poring over a steamship guide.

"There's a boat for Havre to-morrow at ten, Fanchette," said the girl, "and I've booked two berths."

"Yes, ma'mselle," answered Fanchette submissively, but also in earnest approval. And her heart was filled with gratitude to the man whose forbearance had thus enabled her to snatch her lamb from the very jaws of the wolf. It would no doubt have gratified Quaintance greatly to know how he had risen in her esteem.

But Quaintance was in quite another mood with regard to her. And who shall blame him? For, while he still stood, blinking, bewildered, within the thicket in whose safe keeping he had left his car, a hundred ugly suspicions invaded his mind. The worst of these was that he might have been mistaken in his estimate of the girl.

He recalled each circumstance connected with her, from the moment when he had first noticed her on Fifth Avenue, to her hasty nod of concurrence in the errand which had so recently sundered them, and given her opportunity to escape him. He did not forget the rat-faced Frenchman, or Mrs. Smith's obvious constraint with himself: nor yet the individual he had seen seeking ingress to the bungalow.

Looking facts in the face he found himself minus a costly touring car and a round sum in cash. As sole offset to which he had acquired a plain gold bracelet, engraved with the name "Dagmar." That was what hurt him most — the idea that "Dagmar"——

He stood there frowning vexedly, biting his lip, and his eyes lit on an envelope affixed to a tree-trunk by means of a woman's hat-pin. It was addressed to himself, and he was soon possessed of Fanchette's impassioned appeal. It left him in gravest perplexity, quite undecided how he should act, for five full minutes before he came to the conclusion that he could not very well interfere now with her high-handed procedure.

He had no doubt that the girl had gone off with her, and to New York, since the touring car was to be redelivered to him at his hotel there. And for that reason he could not well take any steps to intercept it en route. He would rather suffer its total loss uncomplainingly, if Mrs. Smith cared to take such further advantage of his complaisance, than have the girl subjected to any annoyance which he could save her.

Some thought of pursuit crossed his mind, but he soon dismissed that. The fugitives had nearly an hour's start already, and it was not likely that the runabout could overtake the touring car under any such handicap. There was obviously nothing for it but to make the best of his own way back to Manhattan, reserving the right to call Mrs. Smith to account for her piratical conduct at the earliest opportunity.

But he was in the worst of tempers as he once more made for the porch to procure the key of the barn. The atmosphere of mystery in which the girl seemed to move was extremely distasteful to him. He found Mrs. Smith's manoeuvres intensely irritating, and could by no means divine the nature of the alleged necessity which had deprived him of his anticipated reward for having recovered the missing bracelet.

It was partly a magnanimous impulse and partly a plan in furtherance of his own interests which caused him to stop at the station in Stormport and send on the wire whose delivery at the dock in Long Island City had so alarmed Fanchette. And, having done that, he settled down to his long, lonely run, fretting all the way to New York over these complications, by no means the least of which was the young man in the light tweed suit and panama.

It was after eleven when he reached the garage off Broadway where he kept his car, and there the car was in its usual place. The hotel had called up soon after nine, a clerk told him, to ask that some one be sent to take Mr. Newman's automobile away from the Twenty-fourth street entrance.

Quaintance had his new purchase installed at its side, and, having left strict injunctions that the smaller car be very carefully cleaned and tended, hurried off to cross-question the Twenty-fourth street door-keeper. That worthy had a letter for him, and earned an easy dollar by imparting to him the details of a very brief interview with the grey-haired, elderly woman who had delivered it with the car. Whereafter the recipient of that attention hurried off to his room, there to peruse the precious missive at leisure. He had already noticed that the address had not been penned by Mrs. Smith.

"*Believe me, I regret the trouble I have caused you,*" it said, in clear, straightforward handwriting which somehow brought back to him still more vividly the writer's fair, frank face.

"*If you will kindly keep the bracelet as,*"—*as* had been crossed out and *until* substituted—"*If you will kindly keep the bracelet until I find an opportunity to send for it I shall be still more grateful to you.*"

It said no more than that, and was signed simply "Dagmar." Paper nor envelope held any single clue to where it had been written. She did not mean that he should know her whereabouts. Quaintance judged rightly that she would let the matter rest there, that he would hear no more from her, might count the bracelet his now. He read between the lines that she would thus pay forfeit gracefully, and end the incident. He did not blame her for a moment, but neither did he hold himself bound to accept dismissal otherwise than in specific terms. He sat up late, smoking pipe after pipe, revolving fresh plans for her rediscovery.

Next morning he was up betimes, betook himself with his cigar along Fifth Avenue. None of his overnight schemes seemed so feasible in broad daylight, and he was temporarily at a loose end. Dagmar—he called her Dagmar now, since she had signed herself thus, without surname—Dagmar was in New York, and he might meet her anywhere. Or again he might not. Between these two eventualities there was the slender thread of chance to guide him to that which was the goal of all his desires. How could he tell which way to turn? He must go blindly to the outcome, whatever it should be.

Passing the Holland House he saw a string of hansoms come careering down the avenue. The first of these slowed up, drew in toward the kerb, its driver hailing him with the habitual, "Keb, sir?"

He shook his head indifferently, and sauntered on, but the man turned, and followed him, reiterating his monotonous inquiry until Quaintance lost patience with him.

"Devil take you!" he cried irritably. "Haven't I told you I don't want a cab."

"Do you not wish to drive in poor old J. J.'s keb?" asked a hurt voice, and he jumped round to stare up at the figure on the dicky. It wore a shabby boxcloth coat bedecked with huge pearl buttons, and a silk hat, somewhat too glossy in that connection, beneath whose curly brim appeared Cornoyer's grinning countenance. Quaintance looked back and saw that the whole string had drawn up close behind. The second held a single passenger, whose ruddy, weather-beaten face, adorned with a contented smile, a huge cigar, stamped him the lawful driver of the first. The others carried baggage.

"Jomp in," Cornoyer begged. "Jomp right in, Newman, and I'll drive you to the docks. You must come with me to the steamer. I am on my way home to Paris."

Quaintance could not but laugh at the idea of the procession, and an erratic impulse, added to the fact that an assiduous policeman was eyeing them suspiciously, caused him to join it.

"But no tomfoolery," he stipulated. "Drive straight old man. Don't play at funerals unless you want to miss your boat. It's nearly ten already."

Cornoyer cheerfully adopted his advice, and proved himself no clumsy whip by the dexterity with which he shaved each imminent disaster courted by the pace he set. The other drivers emulated him and many curious glances were directed toward the strange cortège which went whipping down the avenue. Cornoyer's last appearance on that fashionable thoroughfare did not lack éclat.

They turned round by the Cornucopia in order that the traveler might leave cards there, and early visitors to that quiet club flocked to the windows to see him start again, returning his grief-stricken flourish of farewell with interest. Everyone liked Cornoyer, and his ridiculous exit was just what might have been expected of him, but Quaintance felt glad when they once more gained Fifth Avenue, and held straight on for Washington Square and Morton street. He was still more relieved when they reached the dock, and Cornoyer, having doffed his borrowed overcoat and paid off his transport so liberally that they accorded him a round of cheers, permitted himself to be led toward the throng alongside the steamer.

"Gee whiz!" said that gentleman suddenly, "she seems to be goin' away."

This was all too true, for there was already a widening gulf between her lofty steel side and the pier. The last of the warps had been let go. She had started for Havre.

He shrugged his shoulders, and turned to Quaintance with an air of inexhaustible patience.

"Chance of mine I didn't send my baggage down before me!" said he.

But Quaintance paid no attention to him. He was staring up at a figure which had crossed the deck from the cabin-companion to the poop-rail. It was Dagmar. She was gazing forward, her face turned from him, but he knew instinctively that it was she. And, ere he could bring himself to cry out to her before all these people, she had moved away, out of sight.

The shock of such sudden misfortune stunned him. He was too dazed to notice a face in the crowd on shore, with two crafty eyes which were watching him with malevolent mirth.

"You're too late this time, *mon ami*," muttered Jules Chevrel to himself, "and—you've lost her now, for good. She'll step right into our net on the other side. And I hope you'll be fool enough to follow her in time to see how she'll squirm!"

CHAPTER XII

DOMINIC SEAGER MAKES SEVERAL STARTLING DISCOVERIES

After Dominic Seager had paid for his passage to Paris he had about nine hundred dollars left of the thousand obtained from his arbitrary confederate in the scene which was to make both their fortunes. Having settled his Long Beach hotel bill and entertained himself lavishly on the eve of departure, there were less than eight hundred to take on board ship with him. His sporting instincts cost him some three hundred during the voyage, so that when he at length reached Paris from Cherbourg, he could not count even five hundred in his note-case.

But no such commercial calculations disturbed his complacent faith in the future. It would not be long before he could sneer at such petty sums altogether, and then he might find means to mark his displeasure with Arendsen's vulgar parsimony. The mere idea that he had been limited, and at a juncture so all-important, to such a paltry total expenditure galled him whenever he thought of it, but, as he seldom thought of such matters while his pockets were still sufficiently lined for the day, he did not suffer unduly in that respect.

All he had to do now, he thought to himself, lying back in a rickety fiacre on his way from the station to that hotel which he had elected to honor with his patronage, was to present himself at the address given him by the San Francisco lawyers, to wit, the Misses Winters' select *pension*, in the Avenue Morceau, and there announce to Miles Quaintance's adopted daughter that he had come thither to marry her. Soon after that there would be millions at his disposal, not fewer than twelve and a half of them counting in francs, and as many more than that as he could possibly make it.

It would be strange if he could not come to such terms with the girl as should leave him his freedom and the lion's share of the spoil. Then he would either promptly divorce her, or disappear, as she should prefer. The latter would probably be the more simple method, since he could in that way resume his former identity and so effectually cover his fraudulent tracks.

It also remained to be seen whether, once he had the money safe in hand, he could not tax to good purpose Arendsen's most preposterous claim. The ransom he had been forced to promise that robber was altogether out of the question. Any manoeuvre of that sort would, of course, take very delicate management, but a millionaire might accomplish much that would be impossible to a poor man. His estimate of prospective profits on the present venture had risen to twenty-five millions of francs when he reached the Cours-la-Reine and got out before the Hôtel du Palais.

He had decided to put up there for the twofold reason that it was a conventionally correct establishment and at the same time conveniently situated between the Avenue Marceau and his own old haunts in the Ville-Lumière. While he registered he gave the uninterested vestibule to understand that he was someone of importance.

When he arrived it was his firm intention to carry out his mission on the instant. But, by the time he had changed his clothes and otherwise refreshed himself, dusk had come down. And he remembered that the lights in the Rue Royale had already begun to twinkle invitingly as he had passed the Madeleine. It was long since he had set foot in the city of pleasure, and he had lived roughly, at hazard, since then. It would make no appreciable difference if he allowed himself twenty-four hours' liberty first. There would still be time and to spare for all practical purposes.

He turned west instead of east as he left the hotel, in correct evening dress, with his opera-hat at the most rakish of angles, and dined at the Ritz, in the Place Vendôme, where he treated himself royally, without regard to expense, feeling that he was in his true element in its atmosphere of luxury and extravagance. Thence a leisurely stroll, with a good cigar in his lips, took him to the Rue Montpensier, where, at the Palais-Royal, he sat and laughed for an hour or two over a French farce of the broadest.

A hearty supper at Maxim's induced added cheerfulness, and, having learned from a benevolent bystander at the bar there that a whilom resort of his was still doing business at the old stand, he resolved to pay it a surprise visit before returning to his hotel. He considered that it would be most unwise to throw away any chance of increasing his scanty capital, and, while he was in the vein, would just speculate a few francs at the tables on a safe and certain system he had evolved since his last disaster in that direction.

He called a cab and went clattering back to the narrow Rue des Bons Enfants, where it did not take him long to get rid of what cash he had with him. Whereupon he hurried off to the Cours-la-Reine with some muddled idea of returning with what he had left there and breaking the bank after all, but, at sight of his bed, a providential drowsiness overcame him, and he lay down.

It was nearly noon next day before he awoke, still in crumpled evening clothes, haggard, heavy-eyed, and suffering from an unclean taste in his mouth. He blamed this to the last brandy-and-soda of which he had partaken, at the croupier's invitation, in the Street of the Good Children.

He once more counted his assets, uneasily now, and found them sadly shrunk. And when, after a cold bath and light breakfast, he at length started for the Misses Winters' select *pension*, it was under the strong conviction that he had somehow been made a fool of by someone, and that he must forthwith exact satisfaction somewhere for such affront. He rang with vicious emphasis the door-bell of the prim dwelling in the Avenue Marceau, and was unnecessarily abrupt with the maid who answered it.

He was left to kick his heels in a stiffly furnished drawing-room for fully ten minutes while the Misses Winters arrayed themselves to receive their visitor. His tone to them when they did appear was the reverse of conciliatory. It made the two elderly maidens nervous.

"I told that stupid girl that I came here to see Miss Quaintance," he said in a brusque, quarrelsome tone, and Miss Sophia looked somewhat blankly at her sister Jane. It was Miss Jane who replied.

"Miss Quaintance is no longer with us, Mr. Quaintance."

Seager stared at her, and his astonishment was so evident that Sophia felt called upon to supplement the assertion.

"What my sister Jane says is quite correct. Miss Quaintance is no longer with us," she echoed, looking not unlike a grey parrot with her aquiline English features and a peaked cap for crest.

"The deuce she isn't!" gasped Seager, aghast at the grave possibilities opening up.

"Then where is she?"

Miss Jane laid a tremulous hand on Sophia. She was not accustomed to being addressed as though she were a delinquent servant, but, nevertheless, she answered him, in a voice meant to convey that fact to his understanding.

"You have surely heard, Mr. Quaintance," she said, "that Miss Quaintance returned to the United States of America immediately she heard the sad news of Mr. Miles Quaintance's death."

"You have surely heard that, Mr. Quaintance," echoed Miss Sophia as chorus, but Seager was frowning so fiercely now that the words were no more than a whisper.

"The devil she did!" he exclaimed, and the two spinsters shrank from him of common impulse. They neither could nor would tolerate such freedom of speech in their presence. They rose together, and bowed together, and would have withdrawn at once had not he divined their reason for that step and prevented it by means of a hasty apology.

"One moment, one moment, ladies," he begged, more suavely, "and pardon my seeming discourtesy. You'll understand how I feel when I tell you that I've just arrived from the States in the full expectation of finding Miss Quaintance here. Your information comes as a great blow to me. Are you quite sure that what you say is correct?"

Miss Jane looked puzzled, and Miss Sophia adopted the same expression.

"Miss Quaintance left us nearly a year ago," said the former frigidly. "We wrote her lawyers in San Francisco that she intended to go there. We had a letter from her afterwards to say she had reached New York. That is all we know, Mr. Quaintance."

"That is all we know," Miss Sophia affirmed.

"But—but," Seager stammered, "but it was those same San Francisco lawyers who sent me to you. They had no word of her having left you. There must have been some mistake."

"There may be," Miss Jane admitted with quiet dignity, "but we are not accountable for it."

"Under no circumstances," said Miss Sophia firmly, "are we accountable."

Her vain repetition annoyed Seager disproportionately.

"That remains to be seen," he declared, glaring at her vindictively. "She was little more than a schoolgirl when you let her undertake such a journey alone, and——"

"She was accompanied by her maid, a most trust-worthy person," asserted Miss Jane, undaunted by his veiled threat.

"And now, Mr. Quaintance, since we have afforded you such information as we possess, you will perhaps kindly excuse us."

She swept towards the door, her cap atremble with indignation, and her sister followed without further speech. It was only thus that they could express their strong disapproval of this very vulgar person, and, since there was seemingly no more to be learned from them, he did not wait for a servant to show him downstairs, but followed them himself. A photograph caught his eye as he passed the piano, and his quick exclamation at sight of it caused Miss Jane to face about on the threshold with inconvenient results to Sophia, hard at her heels.

"Who's this?" Seager asked, picking up the portrait while Miss Sophia was backing off the train of her sister's skirt. She looked around, still more at sea.

"Why, that's Miss Quaintance," she answered involuntarily, on her own unaided responsibility.

"Phew!" whistled Seager, and the corners of his eyes wrinkled in a smile of delighted amazement. Curiosity as to its cause induced the sisters to linger, irresolutely.

"Then I can tell *you* where Miss Quaintance is. She's in New York. I saw her there not forty-eight hours before I started for this side, and—I didn't know who she was. Gad! *Isn't* that a fierce thing to have happen one?

"I've never seen either her or my uncle, you see," he went on, in response to their looks of bewilderment. "I've spent most of my time abroad for many years past, and only heard of my uncle's death while I was in Africa. I didn't even know then that he had adop—that he had a daughter. But I hurried home, and, as soon as I reached New York, I wrote his lawyers in San Francisco to let me have her address.

"They sent me here. I must see her at once, in connection with his estate, in which she, of course, has a large interest, but on conditions which only I can make clear to her.

"You can understand, therefore, how it affected me to hear that she had left you. All the trouble I've taken on her behalf thrown away, and—— Will you do me the very great favor to let me have this photo?"

Miss Jane did not seem very sure that she should comply with such a request, but Miss Sophia's imagination had been fired by the hint of inheritance, and she thought that, if it would help the girl, of whom she had been very fond in her old-maidish way, to any rights in that direction, they need not scruple to part with the photograph.

"There is your copy upstairs, Jane," she once more took the initiative.

"That one is mine, Mr. Quaintance," she said to Seager, "and I shall be pleased to let you have it, on Miss Quaintance's account."

"You're very good," he assured her, and his more pleasant tone did not fail to have its effect.

"Miss Quaintance is a sweet girl," she added. "When you see her, will you please give her our love."

"Gladly," responded Seager, bowing with great outward deference, and held the door for them while they passed from the room. In the hall he expressed more profuse thanks for their kindness and civility, finally taking himself off under much more agreeable auspices than those which had marked the earlier stages of the interview.

"Gentlemen from America are sometimes so—so unusual," Miss Sophia commented forgivingly as she closed the hall door behind him. "But it must be a very rough place in parts, especially in the canned-beef districts where all those dreadful exposures came from. I think he has a good heart under his harsh exterior."

"Humph!" sniffed Miss Jane. "He may have, but he certainly conceals it effectually at times. He threatened us, actually *threatened* us, in our own house!"

"But it was on Miss Quaintance's account that he was upset," her sister argued plaintively. She had not the same fund of common-sense as Miss Jane, and was somewhat handicapped in life by a leaning toward the impractical and romantic.

"I hope he finds her," she concluded. "There seems to have been some confusion as to her movements. You had no reply from those people in San Francisco when you wrote, Jane?"

"No, I had no reply," said Miss Jane, and returned to her household tasks. The permanent guests with whom the select *pension* was well filled left her little time for outside interests.

Seager turned down the avenue again, his mind in a state bordering on distraction. The photograph, at which he took two or three surreptitious peeps as he hurried toward his hotel, was that of the identical girl he had encountered, with her motor car broken down, on the road into Long Island City, some eight or nine days before. It was that enchanting creature whom he must marry! And he had not had sense enough even to ask her name at the time! What devastating results might not that oversight yet produce?

He calculated that there were less than three weeks left in which to comply with the stipulations contained in Miles Quaintance's last will and testament, failing whose fulfilment he would be in a most unenviable plight, one alive with the gravest risks to himself. Black Dirck had a long reach, and he himself might not succeed in escaping that dangerous devil a second time. He would be a pauper instead of a millionaire. He would win no wife, and—the thought of the girl he had seen was a goad unendurable. He must hasten back to New York at once, and take up the chase again there.

What he wanted to know at the moment was how much money he could command to that end. He had a hundred francs in his pocket and some small change. When he reached his room and had gathered together his entire resources, there were not quite three hundred francs all told. Sixty dollars to pay his hotel bill and traveling expenses! The thing was absurd and impossible. He must have more money, and that instantly. It was Arendsen's fault that he found himself stranded at a crisis so unforeseen. Had that niggardly speculator put up the two thousand dollars required of him, his unfortunate partner in the deal need not have been left in any such hole. He must cable immediately.

He did so, stating that his quarry had left Paris, asking for a prompt remittance by wire in order that he might follow her. And Arendsen had a note of the date on which their venture must perforce lapse should the terms of the will not then be fulfilled.

"That ought to fetch him, I think," he reflected angrily, re-reading what he had written, and bade the boy who answered his bell bring a brandy-and-soda as soon as he should have despatched the message.

"Gad!" he said to himself after he had swallowed that beverage and lit one of the expensive cigars with which he had thoughtfully filled his case over night at the Ritz, "What a note! If I had only known who she was I'd have got my kiss after all. Think of all that poor devil has missed! Think of all that's coming to me! Dominic, my boy, you're going to get your deserts at last. After all these ups and downs you'll take the top notch you're entitled to. I'll be off the moment Arendsen sends me the price of my ticket.

"Let's see. It's two o'clock now. If he wires at once I'll be able to touch the bank before closing time to-day. If not, I'll have to wait till to-morrow. That'll leave me a short enough few days after I land again to fix things up in, but I'm a lightning artist when I see a chance of drawing free-hand cheques for the rest of my life. And furthermore I'd move heaven and earth for a girl like that, quite apart from the money I'll get with her."

His most immediate move, however, was in the direction of the buffet, where he swallowed a second brandy-and-soda to soothe his overwrought nervous system. By four o'clock he had two more to settle for, and no cable had yet come. He cursed Arendsen bitterly, and then made excuse for him. Black Dirck might have been out of town. Two hours was a short enough time in which to expect a reply. There were half a dozen possible reasons for the delay. He would have his remittance in good time for to-morrow morning, and as to the present, he might just as well put in his time pleasantly as hang about there counting the minutes in the company of a lot of snobs who took no interest in his conversation.

He called a cab, crossed the Invalides bridge, and sought inexpensive distraction in Montparnasse, with the remains of his working capital in his pockets.

CHAPTER XIII

WHY A MILLIONAIRE SHOOK THE HOTEL DU PALAIS

"So that's his game is it!" snapped Dirck Arendsen, flinging down with contemptuous gesture the cable message which he had found on his desk when he entered the dingy Duane street office at half-past nine one comfortless, drizzling morning.

"The girl's left Paris, and he must have more money. 'At once, too!"

He threw off his wet overcoat, sat down, and was silent for some time, his face growing ever blacker.

"*What* a fool he is! What a chance he's throwing away through his cursed folly! And my chance, too, just as much as his.

"I thought—but, no matter. Paris has been too much for him. And now he imagines he's got me roped fast to grub-stake him to a finish!"

His beard and moustache were bristling with rage. His eyes blazed.

"I'll stake him! I'll stake him so that he won't move hand or foot when I've done with him.

"Wulf! Wulf! Are you there, Wulf? Run round to Rischoff's and tell them to send me a ticket for Paris. Yes, Paris, first-class, lowest rate, by the very first boat. Find out when I must be on board."

Twenty-four hours later he set out on Seager's track, and for six long days at sea did his wrath ferment.

Bottled up, it acquired a still more dangerous head. He counted the hours while they slipped away in an enforced idleness, and ground his teeth every time he heard a clock tick. He knew to a minute when the period of grace allowed by Miles Quaintance's will would expire.

He was in no pleasant humor, therefore, when he reached the Hôtel du Palais, and it was perhaps just as well for himself and Dominic Seager that the latter was not at hand when the irate traveler arrived.

Arendsen left his cab at the kerb and asked snappishly at the bureau for the number of his confederate's room, with the intention of taking him unawares there, and then swore at the clerk on the score of his slowness in furnishing the information required. It did not soothe him to learn that Seager had recently been evicted from the hotel, and still owed a lengthy score there.

"If Monsieur will be so good as to settle that," suggested the clerk, turning the other's angry eagerness to his own employers' advantage, "I shall be happy to tell him how he may perhaps find his friend."

"And if not?" asked Arendsen, struck by the impudence of the proposal.

The man shrugged his shoulders indifferently.

"If not," he returned, "it may be concluded that the gentleman is no friend of Monsieur's."

Situated as he was, Arendsen had no option but to accept his offer.

"Make out the receipt," he growled. "I'll pay. And where shall I seek the debtor?"

The clerk took good care to have the transaction completed to his own liking ere parting with news of such consequence, and, having first counted carefully the notes handed him, locked them away.

"Monsieur's friend has come here once or twice since he left, to inquire for a cablegram he expects," he said quietly. "It seems that, when it arrives, he will settle his bill and then sue the Hôtel du Palais for damages on the ground of wrongous ejectment. He will doubtless, therefore, return, and, if Monsieur cares to await him——"

"But I may have to wait for days," Arendsen objected, his heart full of bitterness as he remembered how few of these there were left before all those millions shall fall into the clutches of charity.

The clerk once more shrugged his shoulders.

"I know of no better way," he remarked.

Arendsen could cheerfully have strangled him at that moment, but there were too many witnesses on the spot, and he had to adopt a more peaceful policy.

"You may give me a room, if you have one available," he said abruptly, conscious that he had been outwitted at all points by the astute Parisian, "and if this—this person should turn up, you'll find means to detain him until you can get word to me."

"Gladly, Monsieur. That will not be difficult."

"Don't tell him I'm here, remember. Say that there is some word for him, and send for me instantly."

"Monsieur's orders will be observed. Number fifty-six. Jean-Marie! Conduct Monsieur to number fifty-six. Felix! Monsieur's baggage to the *ascenseur*."

When Arendsen got to his room he was almost on the point of explosion. He had never doubted that he would find Seager anxiously waiting him, but, instead, he found him lacking all object on which to expend his concentrated rage and resentment. It would be doubly hard now to sit there wasting precious time and its irredeemable opportunities.

But there was no other course to be thought of. It would be idle to seek that prodigal throughout the city. He must stick to his position with all the patience he might, and trust that the wanderer would return before it should be too late.

"I'll see this thing through to the bitter end," said Arendsen savagely, and, having donned the new suit he had bought before leaving New York, and had his hair and beard trimmed to a less piratical aspect, established himself in an inconspicuous corner of the vestibule with a cigar and a bundle of comic papers, outwardly at his ease but inwardly smouldering like a volcano.

That day passed uneventfully, its monotony only varied by meals for which he had no appetite, and, when he went upstairs again at a late hour, his sullen rage was still mounting steadily. Twelve more hours had gone by, and by so much had his chances of a great fortune diminished. The thought of that had become an obsession with him.

On the following morning he rose unrefreshed, after a sleepless night, and took up his station immediately he had breakfasted; a needless precaution at that hour since he was quite well aware that Seager's nocturnal habits were not such as might conduce to early rising. He meant to run no risk of missing his man, however, and stayed there, a statue of vengeance, all that day and the next and the next again, always at the same spot, impervious to the curious glances bestowed on him.

It would have suited his mood much better to take some more active measures, to scour the kennels from gate to gate in search of the errant Seager. But, even as he had once told that bungler of his own and other men's chances in life, he could be very patient. It was by virtue of such a quality, as well as others less admirable, that he had risen, or fallen if you prefer it, from the status of an underpaid master in the mercantile marine to that of a more or less wealthy dealer in what he called hardware, while others would have described his occupation as that of an illicit trader in weapons and ammunitions of war.

It takes a man of cold courage and nerve to follow any such dangerous calling successfully, and he had not altogether failed in it. Few people had found it pleasant to stand in his light, and one at least who had done so had finished up in the North River, not very far from Duane street, with a hole through his head which had greatly puzzled the police who picked up the body. In short, Dirck Arendsen was an absolutely unscrupulous scoundrel, and it would surely go ill with Seager when he should come within reach of his pursuer. On the fifth afternoon of that fuming watcher's seemingly endless ambush, Seager walked carelessly into the vestibule of the Hôtel du Palais.

He did not see Arendsen, and Arendsen did not spring from his seat at the sight of him. The big, black-bearded man stayed still where he was, watching his unconscious accomplice swagger up to the bureau, smiling sardonically as he saw the clerk point toward him in mute reply to Seager's assertive inquiry. But if he had hoped that the other would show any sign of dismay over his presence there, he was doomed to quick disappointment, for Seager gave him back a look as black as his own when their eyes met, and bore down on him like a thunder-cloud.

That sufferer from a supposed friend's distrust had thought the situation out to a nicety, and the conclusion to which he had come since Arendsen had not replied to his urgent message was now proved correct. It was in the expectation of seeing Black Dirck in Paris that he had eked out a wretched existence of late, rather than take any desperate steps toward a return to New York. He felt hot against the other for having left him in such sorry plight, and his opening speech quite took the wind out of Arendsen's sails.

"Curse you!" he began in a low, tense tone as he threw himself into a chair alongside his treacherous ally, while the clerk looked on half relieved and half disappointed that there had been no such disturbance as promised.

"Curse you, Arendsen! Why didn't you reply to my wire? You've let me rot in a nice hole here, and the girl's in New York. There's only a week of the year left now, and we may be too late after all, owing to your infernal folly. What was the use of slinking over here after me? I gave you the straight tip, but you're such a crook that you couldn't take it for that, I suppose. You're robbing me, that's what you're doing, and cutting off your nose to spite your damned ugly face."

Arendsen eyed him evilly, but heard him out in silence, too much taken aback by his unfeigned belief that the grievance was all on his side to break in.

"What have you done with all the money I gave you?" he hissed through set teeth as the other concluded, but Seager glared all the more fiercely at him and renewed his complaint.

"Curse you and the money you gave me! Can't you get it into your thick skull that it's millions we're after. Is *this* any time to haggle about a handful of small change! I tell you, Arendsen, if we fall down now I'll hold you responsible. I let you in on the ground floor, and first thing I know you go back on me, at the most critical moment. Why didn't you cable me the price of a passage? Would that have cost you a cent more than coming across? What good have you done by coming? Answer me that, if you can."

He was so thoroughly convinced of the correctness of his own viewpoint that Arendsen was somewhat staggered. It was impossible to controvert his arguments to the effect that distrust of his honesty and motives had cost them days irredeemable. And Seager's obvious belief in his own blamelessness had also disconcerted him. A thousand dollars was certainly a small sum in comparison with the prize they aspired to. It was no time for profitless dispute. Arendsen recognized that fact and acted on it, sinking all his own pent up animosity in favor of a final effort toward success.

"Tell me what you found out about the girl," he ordered briefly.

"Buy me a brandy-and-soda first," Seager snapped. "I've been living on husks since my money went, and that was a good many days ago—though I don't suppose you care about that. You must give me a square deal from now onwards, Arendsen, and don't you forget, my friend, that I'm king-pin in this game. You needn't suppose that you can treat me like a dog because you've got a few dollars."

Arendsen patiently complied with his requirement, and Seager, having first drunk off the liquor, told him in few words what he had been able to learn from the two old maids in the Avenue Marceau.

"And now comes the sore point," he said indignantly, "the point where you ought to have backed me up to your last penny. The girl's in New York, as I told you, whatever she's doing there. And I met her, without knowing who she was, the night before I called on you in Duane street."

Arendsen stared at him half incredulously.

"No, I'm not making any mistake. I know what I'm talking about. I spent half an hour in her company—and she'll know me again, too, I think.

"I met her on my way in to Manhattan from Long Beach. I went to stop when I landed from Africa in case you should run across me before I had made up my mind——"

"While you were trying the San Francisco lawyers for money, so that you might leave me out," Arendsen corrected him, but he took no notice.

"She was alone in a runabout which had broken down, late at night too, and I helped her to start it again. I'd swear to her anywhere, and one of those Winters women gave me her photograph. Look at her. Don't you think I'd remember a face like that? I tell you, Arendsen, I'll owe you the grudge of my life if I miss this marriage and all it means, through you. And I'll make a point of paying it too."

"I'll see that you pay what you owe me," said Arendsen with returning ill humor. He had grown gradually calmer as Seager became excited, but the other's insistence on that particular point was beginning to stir his temper again. He glanced contemptuously at the photograph offered for his inspection. Then he started forward in his arm-chair with a quick exclamation:

"Will you swear that this is the girl?" he demanded eagerly.

"I've told you already I'll swear to her anywhere. There aren't so many of that brand about that I'd ever make a mistake as to her. That's the girl I met in the motor, Miles Quaintance's adopted daughter, and my future wife. And she's worth ten millions to us when we find her."

Arendsen's anger had all evaporated. He sat back and slapped his knee, chuckling in his beard, eyes still fixed on the photograph, and, when he at length caught Seager's glance of incensed astonishment, that seemed but to add to his mirth.

"What the devil's the matter with you?" asked that irate conspirator with a most acid inflection.

"There's nothing the matter with *me*," answered Arendsen. "Not with me, anyway. It's you that's on the wrong scent, Dominic, my boy, and what I'm here for is to put you right."

"Isn't that the girl?" Seager questioned explosively. "Are you going to tell me that you know her better than I do? You may as well save your breath."

"I'm going to tell you," returned his companion impressively, "that I know better than you *where she is.* She's in Paris. She came across from New York in the same steamer with me."

He gazed triumphantly at the other, and Seager's countenance slowly assumed a similar geniality as he grasped gradually, by degrees, the import of that astonishing statement.

"She came over in the same steamer with you!" he repeated as if scarcely able to credit such glad intelligence.

"And she traveled in the same train from Havre," continued Arendsen. "I saw her get out at the Gare St. Lazare. Tell me now whether I'd have done better to stay in New York."

"But you didn't know," Seager argued. "It was pure chance. A most marvellous piece of luck!"

He said no more for a moment, revolving it in his mind.

"Did you find out her destination? Was she alone?" he demanded at length, and Arendsen shook his head, less elated.

"I spent my time in the smoking room," he replied. "She was traveling as Miss Lorraine, according to the passenger list, and had a maid with her. That's all I can tell you."

"Well, we must find her at once, wherever she is," Seager cried, and sprang to his feet. "Come on. There's no use of throwing away our time here. Paris is a big place, and we can't afford to make any more mistakes now."

"Sit down," cried Arendsen sharply. "We must go to work with some method if we want any result. How are we going to set about it? You know this town better than I do, but I think——"

"I must have some money to start with," Seager broke in. "I owe a bill here, and they've got my baggage all stowed away in one of their cellars. It was a dirty trick, Arendsen, to leave me rotting here without a word."

"I was a good deal upset by your message," said Arendsen smoothly, "or I'd have wired you that I was coming. I've paid your bill—so you see that I always meant well by you—and here's fifty francs to go on with."

Seager glared at him.

"Cut that out," he commanded. "I'm not a schoolboy asking for pocket-money. I'll take a thousand to start with, and let you know when I need more.

"Garçon! Cognac and English soda. Hurry, we don't want to sit here all day.

"Tell you what we'll do first, Arendsen. We'll call at that boarding house where she stayed when she was here before. Bet you they'll know where we can find her. But before that we'll change our hotel. And I'll just take this opportunity of telling that pie-faced pup in the office what I think of him. Or no, I'll get hold of the manager. He'll make it hot enough for the clerk when I tell him why this millionaire's going to shake the Hôtel du Palais."

CHAPTER XIV

THE MISSES WINTERS HEAR MORE ABOUT MILES QUAINTANCE'S WILL

Neither Fanchette nor her young mistress was well acquainted with those parts of Paris where dwell such as would live unnoticed, and, when they reached the great city, in the same train by which Dirck Arendsen traveled, they were very much at a loss to know where to turn for safe shelter.

Situated as they were, it did not suit their purpose to register at an hotel, and, since to elude observation by any of Monsieur's people was their chief object, and his usual haunts lay well south of the Rue St. Lazare, they turned north to seek out some private lodging. Fanchette had bethought herself of a countrywoman and gossip of hers who had, in years gone by, let rooms in the Rue des Trois Frères, and thither they made their way.

The Street of the Three Brothers did not prove at all an attractive one, and it turned out, moreover, that Fanchette's friend had gone back to La Roche-Segur, having disposed of her modest *maison meublée* to an up-to-date Parisian. But that shrewd dame showed them so much attention as well as the rooms she had vacant that, for lack of other resort, they resolved to remain there meantime. Fanchette went down stairs again to rate the ill-tempered concierge of the house whose rough and ready method of handling hat-boxes did not meet with her approval, while the girl threw herself disconsolately into a chair beside the window of her little chamber and looked out with weary eyes at the dull, dingy street.

What she saw and heard there was all so different from the clean, sweet solitude of the quiet bungalow on Peconic Bay that she could by no means shake off the dejection induced by the contrast. And neither was this the Paris which she had known, that bright, sunny vista of avenues and open spaces where one might wander at will and without fear of any such enemy as she was seeking concealment from now.

Circumstances had changed very sadly for her since she had ceased to be an inmate of the modest *pension* on the Avenue Marceau, since that fateful day on which she had kissed the two old maids there good-bye, gone out into an unknown world to shape her own destiny to her own ideas. And it had cost her almost more than she could well count to shape it to such futile end that she was now a denizen of the Rue des Trois Frères, alone and friendless save for Fanchette!

Withal, however, she could not find it in her to repent herself of that most impulsive step. She had done all she could to extricate herself from the cruel tangle in which fate had enmeshed her. Some day, perhaps, she would be free, and, while she lived, she would fight for her freedom. She was a soldier's daughter, and for her there could be no surrender. That brave thought sufficed to comfort her, and, when Fanchette once more appeared, she put all doubts behind her, resolutely assumed an outward indifference to her surroundings which went far to encourage her companion.

That afternoon they spent indoors, but next day they drove to the bank in which she had been forced to leave such funds as had been lying there on the occasion of her hurried flight from France, and which she had not since felt safe to send for, lest in doing so she should afford her enemy clue to her whereabouts. It was no great amount, not much more than ten thousand francs, accumulated from the liberal allowance Miles Quaintance had made her during her sojourn in Europe, but it was a comfort to have it once more in her own possession. All there was left of the sum obtained by the sale of her car would not have lasted them long, whereas, with this supplement, it would be possible to carry out her intention of earning her further livelihood in some far part of the world. Other girls were doing that—why not she?

She fancied that the clerk who attended her in the bank had shown more interest in her than was altogether necessary, but he asked no needless questions as she feared he might, and, when she returned to Fanchette who was anxiously awaiting her in a closed cab at the sidewalk, it was with the gratifying announcement that she had accomplished the object of their long voyage from New York.

"Yes, everything went quite smoothly," she told that apprehensive questioner. "They paid my cheque without the slightest hesitation, and—all will go well now, Fanchette. To-morrow, I think, we may leave for London."

"Why not to-night, ma'mselle?" Fanchette asked eagerly. "Delay may bring danger, and—Monsieur is powerful in Paris, even from a great distance."

"To-night, then, if you will," the girl agreed readily.

When they reached the Rue des Trois Frères, however, André, the concierge, came forward, chuckling causelessly, to tell them that there was a visitor waiting them. Their irrepressible start of dismay did not escape his sharp eyes, and he was still chuckling when he got back to his lair underneath the stairs they were tremulously ascending.

"*Eh, bien, Mdlle. Fanchette!*" said he to himself in a tone of great satisfaction. "It is now that you must feel sorry you spoke so rudely to André yesterday. That old good-for-nothing has still a tooth in his head, and can bite with it, Mdlle. Fanchette."

They entered their little parlor, in trepidation to find a stranger installed there, a man of coldly official aspect, with something of the professional ferret about him, who turned out to be an *agent de sûreté* from the Prefecture on the Quai des Orfèvres.

He explained his mission, politely enough but with obvious indifference. The declaration of identity made by Mdlle. Lorraine on entering the country was believed to be a misleading one. The Chief of Police directed that she and the person described as Fanchette Lefevre should remain in their present quarters and under surveillance pending some inquiry by the department into mademoiselle's antecedents.

"But this is an outrage!" the girl exclaimed. "The Chief of Police is apparently not aware that I'm an American."

The plain-clothes policeman shrugged his shoulders. He did not know, and did not greatly care. His part was solely that of a messenger.

"Mademoiselle is allowed every liberty of movement," he suggested smoothly, "except as regards leaving Paris. It might be that application to the American Consul would serve to put matters right for her."

She shook her head vexedly, knowing that such recourse had been cut off by her own conduct. And the man did not fail to observe the involuntary action, from which he drew his own inference. He rose to go.

"Mademoiselle will be closely watched," he warned her. "It will therefore be well to comply carefully with the requirements of the authorities."

"But for how long?" she asked, in desperation.

"Until further notice. Word will be sent as soon as the surveillance can safely be discontinued."

The two women looked at each other, aghast, as his footsteps sounded more faintly and ceased. Fanchette crept across to a window, and, peering therefrom, saw him stop on the opposite pavement to exchange a few words with a shabby-looking nondescript lounging in a low doorway there. Both looked up in her direction, and, in spite of the muslin screen which sheltered her from their gaze, she shrank back, crossing herself. The strange prescience of the Quai des Orfèvres frightened her, as it has frightened many of a more educated intelligence.

"We may almost give up the struggle, it seems, Fanchette," said the girl after a long interval, during which she had been counting every remaining chance. Her eyes were heavy, her tone was one of hopeless discouragement. "To carry it on now would be to court needless scandal, and, after all we have sacrificed to escape that, it would be foolish as well as futile to incur it at the finish. There's nothing for it but to await

Monsieur's next move, and meantime we must make the time pass as best we can.

"We have nothing to fear from the police," she continued, to soothe her maid's very evident agitation, "while we don't attempt to evade them. They will not molest us, Fanchette. We are free to come and go as we please, in Paris. This is no more than Monsieur's method of detaining us until he comes."

Fanchette nodded her comprehension, but was not comforted. She was a peasant woman of the Vendée, where Monsieur too had been born. Her humble home had lain under the swart shadow of his father's great fortalice at La Roche-Segur, which was his now. Something of the old feudal awe oppressed her in his presence, and she had an absurd belief in the scope of his powers. It had required no common courage on her part to aid the girl against him, and now it terrified her to anticipate his coming.

She put a brave face on it, none the less, for the girl's sake, and they two kept each other thus in countenance during the dreary days that ensued. They did not venture outdoors again for some time, and had no further visitors, so that they were not profitable to the avaricious André, ensconced in his den at the stair-foot, always on the lookout for *pourboires*. But he bided his time, and grumbled, always grumbled.

"There will be more of interest presently," he told himself each time he carried up to Fanchette the marketing which madame the proprietrix had done for her, and knocked, and had the door shut sharply in his face as soon as he had accomplished his errand. Fanchette did not like André either, and was too honest to attempt petty diplomacy.

"There will be more of interest presently. Such an one as Ma'mselle does not live in the Rue des Trois Frères, and with a detective at the door, for nothing. She is young, and beautiful! And genteel too,—not like those others! But as for her *femme-de-chambre*—Bah!"

And André snapped his fingers derisively, screwing his snub nose into still uglier shape.

The days passed somehow, and nothing disturbed their monotony. The shabby-looking nondescript kept careful watch, but Fanchette had become accustomed to his company and even plucked up courage to suggest that the girl and she might as well go out and get some fresh air, if only for health's sake.

"We'll go down to the Avenue Marceau this afternoon, if you like," her mistress assented. "There's nothing to be gained now by hiding here, and it will do us no harm to have a chat with the two old ladies. They will not gossip about our affairs."

That afternoon, therefore, they took the Métropolitain to the Place de l'Etoile and walked down to the Misses Winters' select *pension*, where they were received with a warmth of welcome which did them both good. It was inspiriting to find that they had at least two friends in the teeming city, where, they had been prone to think of late, they were pent in among mysterious enemies. And even the stiffly furnished drawing-room seemed homelike and familiar after the Rue des Trois Frères.

"And we have news for you, my dear," Miss Jane said, while Miss Sophia, on hospitable thoughts intent, bustled about a tiny tea-table set near the window.

"We have great news for you, if you have not already heard it,—about your cousin?"

She beamed inquiringly upon the girl, who answered, with a sudden sinking of the heart which left her lips pale,

"I have heard nothing of him."

"He was here only a few days ago," said Miss Sophia, not to be outdone of opportunity.

"And very much upset he was to find that you had left us," said Miss Jane.

Fanchette sniffed, and her mistress turned troubled eyes from one to another of the two sisters, who were regarding her with a triumphant smile, imagining in their kind hearts that she could not but be delighted to hear of her new-found relative.

"He had come all the way from San Francisco in search of you," resumed Miss Sophia, making that misstatement from a memory never to be trusted.

"And he declared that you had not gone there when you left Paris," Miss Jane added a little doubtfully, not wishing to display an undue curiosity and yet desirous that she should be able to refute such a misrepresentation of fact.

The girl had not been very certain how much it might be wise to tell them, but this unexpected information decided her. It did not seem fair that her motives should be so liable to misconstruction, and she almost regretted now that she had not given them her confidence from the beginning. But she had been afraid that Miss Sophia's garrulous simplicity might have betrayed her, no matter how unwittingly, and it would have been too invidious to beg Miss Jane to keep a secret from her sister.

"He was quite right," she answered quickly, now that she had made up her mind to clear herself in their eyes. "I didn't go to San Francisco after all. And I must tell you why. I hope you won't think I did wrong, because—I couldn't help myself."

"My dear," Miss Jane assured her tenderly, "I'm sure that you would not do anything but what was right and proper. I said so to Sophia, after your cousin called. But go on."

"It was because of him I had to leave you," the girl began. "I must explain, in the first place, that he is not my cousin except by courtesy.

"You see," she went on while the sisters listened in grave surprise, "Mr. Miles Quaintance had no family. He was not married. My father was Lieutenant General Lorraine, and, when he died in San Francisco, not many months after my mother, Mr. Quaintance adopted me. I was an infant then.

"He always called me Elinor, after some old sweetheart of his. I didn't know my own name till the day before I left for Europe, when he told me my history and what I owed him—although I had had no voice in the matter."

"He wrote of you as Elinor," said Miss Sophia. "Elinor Quaintance. I wonder who she married."

Her mind was running on the dead man's dead romance—or tragedy. Her face expressed intensest interest.

"I don't know," the girl rejoined, "but he believed that he had been bitterly wronged. He was a strange man in many ways, very reserved and often moody, always most arbitrary. I am indebted to him for all I ever had, and yet—I had no love for him. I was glad to leave his house to come here."

"Oh, my dear!" cried Miss Jane, much distressed.

"It may be wrong, but—one can't help one's feelings, and it's best to be quite honest about it. Had I had any choice, I would have owed him nothing. No man can buy affection. He cannot buy another's flesh and blood, nor can he sell either of these. Mr. Quaintance believed he had bought me. He would have sold me too. Can you blame me if I feel barely grateful to him?"

She paused, half wishful of some assurance that she was not so blameworthy as she had sometimes deemed herself in spite of her strong innate sense of right and wrong, but the problem involved was all too complicated yet for the sisters, whose lives had always run in straight, well-charted channels.

"When Mr. Quaintance died," she once more went on, "his lawyers sent me a long letter he had written me. I was a very cruel letter and told me, in so many words, that he had already disposed of my future. I was to marry his brother's son, a man I had never heard of before and whom he had never seen. And there was a penalty attached, which he no doubt thought too dreadful to be incurred by either of us.

"He had left a large estate, some millions, I think, which would be awarded us on the sole condition that we were married within a year of his death. Failing which, we would both be left penniless.

"In other words, he had made up his mind to present me, his chattel, to an unknown man, and to pay him handsomely for accepting me. Would any girl have submitted to such unspeakable degradation!"

She was breathing quickly, her eyes aglow with a wounded pride.

"I was powerless to alter the past, and I felt my position so keenly then that I didn't dare to ask your advice, in case you should seek to influence me against the decision I came to as soon as I had read the letter through. Mr. Quaintance had written his nephew to the same effect, and I was dreadfully afraid he might seek me out at once. I was quite determined that, under no circumstances, would I consent to any such monstrous arrangement, and, although I was little more than a school-girl then, I felt that starvation would be far easier and less painful than ——"

"You were quite right, my dear," Miss Jane commented, as she stopped at a loss for words in which to express the alternative decently. That spinster had all the respect of the shabby-genteel for wealth and position, but under her well-worn, old-fashioned bodice beat the heart of a plain-thinking, old-fashioned woman who did not believe that womanhood should be bartered for wealth and position, or that a harlot's bread could be aught but bitter.

"You were quite right, my dear, and—I wish you had trusted us."

The girl bowed her head, in regret that was much more poignant than her friends could understand while there was still untold what might well prove the worst half of her misfortunes. And as to that half she could not even now take them fully into her confidence.

"I wish I had, dear Miss Jane," she said humbly. "But—I ran away instead. I went to New York, and stopped there instead of crossing to San Francisco. I had not posted the letter you wrote telling Mr. Quaintance's lawyers that I was leaving you. I didn't intend to have anything more to do with them, and—my only ambition was to keep out of the nephew's way. But, at the last moment, I—I was so hurried that I had to leave some of my money in the bank here, and Fanchette and I have come over to see about that."

Silence followed her somewhat abrupt conclusion, and she sat, with anxious eyes, awaiting their verdict on her behavior. Fanchette was respectfully seated behind her, one of Miss Sophia's most cherished afternoon-teacups in her trembling, work-worn hands. Miss Jane was stiffly erect in her straight-backed chair, Miss Sophia gazing abstractedly out of the window, her mind occupied not with the past but with future possibilities. And neither of them was inclined to misjudge the girl.

"Then you don't wish to meet this young man at all," said Miss Jane decisively. "He's been here two or three times to find out whether you've called. He told us that you were in Paris again although we were scarcely inclined to believe him at first."

"How can he know that!" cried the girl in renewed alarm. "Oh, I hope you won't tell him a word about me, Miss Jane, Miss Sophia. Please promise me that."

"You may depend upon us, my dear," the sisters assured her in chorus.

"And, to tell you the truth," Miss Jane added with strong conviction, "he isn't altogether a—a nice young man."

"Not by any means a nice young man," Miss Sophia affirmed, recollecting how Seager had glared at her in the course of their first interview.

"And you needn't give us any address," her sister suggested. "If he should call again, as he said he would, we shall simply inform him that we don't know where you are, and beg him to discontinue his visits."

"There's a shabby-looking person outside staring up at the house at this moment," said Miss Sophia from her window seat, a tremor in her thin voice. "I hope he hasn't employed a private detective to trace you—although, to be sure, he looked just the sort of gentleman who would do that."

"Stuff and nonsense!" her sister retorted sharply. "Sophia, you read far too many novels. People don't do that sort of thing in real life."

"The man's there, all the same," Miss Sophia protested, and their guest rose, inwardly much embarrassed.

"I think I'll go now," she said anxiously, unwilling to excite further conjecture while she herself knew, only too well, who her unpleasant attendant was.

"Thank you so much for all your kindness and—and encouragement. I wish I could have told you——"

"My dear," Miss Jane broke in, kissing her with great tenderness, "come to us when you can, and tell us what you will. We are two poor old women, not very able, perhaps, to advise you. But you may be sure that we'll never advise you otherwise than as your own mother would. Had we believed that there's nothing in this world of more worth than money, we need not have been keeping a boarding house to-day. Be brave! You'll see your way by degrees, and if we can help you in any manner, we will, most gladly."

"Poor thing!" Miss Sophia sighed soulfully as she returned to her favorite post at the window, to watch the two disappear down the avenue faithfully followed by the lounger she had observed, a fact which she did not fail to communicate argumentatively to her sister. "Poor thing! I hope she'll be happy. She's so strong, Jane. Not many girls would have withstood the temptation of millions, I fear—and the strong suffer most."

"I'm surprised at you, Sophia," Miss Jane returned, still severely. "No right-minded girl would have acted otherwise than she has done, and I don't know what sort of man Mr. Miles Quaintance could have been to plan such a ——"

"Then all I can say, Jane, is," Sophia interpolated, "that there are a good many wrong-minded girls nowadays."

Miss Jane was on the point of reprehending her for such a censorious statement when she was balked in that praiseworthy purpose by an exclamation of dismay from her younger sister.

"Dear me! What is it now, Sophia?" she asked aggrievedly.

"Oh, how unfortunate! Jane, they've just met that gentleman with the black beard who was with Mr. Quaintance last time he called—and he's stopped them —and, well I declare!—if they haven't all three gone on together.

"Jane, I don't see *how* she can help herself now. He'll take her straight to her cousin."

CHAPTER XV

PLAISIR D'AMOUR NE DURE QU'UN MOMENT

But, while events were thus conspiring against the rightful heirs to Miles Quaintance's millions, the dead man's legitimate nephew, indifferent as ever to his uncle's wishes and the reward of compliance with them, had not been idle in the pursuit of his own expensive ambition.

No sooner had Stephen Quaintance seen the girl whom he knew only as Dagmar sail from New York than he determined to follow her. Cornoyer and he together crossed by the first available steamer. They landed at Cherbourg and came on to Paris in haste by train.

"You must come to my house to stop," said Cornoyer affectionately, as the fast express sped through Clichy-Levallois on its way to St. Lazare. "My mother will be much pleased to see you there."

"Sorry old chap," said Quaintance, "but—I've got another engagement. You're very kind, and I'd like nothing better, but—some other time."

Cornoyer's face expressed the extreme of dejection, but he said no more at the moment—so much had he learned of Quaintance's character—and presently they rolled into the busy terminus.

"*Voila la p'tite maman!*" cried the volatile Frenchman exuberantly, and, bursting forth ere the train had well slowed down, threw his arms about a fashionably dressed matron who might almost have passed for his sister. She returned his embrace with equal fervor, quite disregarding the general public which was taking an unaffected interest in the distinguished-looking young man with whom the handsome *grande dame* seemed to be on such intimate terms. Then she held him at arm's length to see what he looked like after his prolonged absence in foreign parts, and Cornoyer beckoned Quaintance forward.

"There is here a Yank in the train who is my friend," he cried ecstatically, "and you must make him come home with us.

"This is my little old mamma," he remarked to Quaintance, hat in hand before his mother. "She speaks no English like me, but she is *the* goods." And, leaving the two together, he turned to where a tall footman in quietly sumptuous livery was occupied in extracting their light baggage from the compartment, and who received him with an irrepressible grin.

"Holé, Gaston. I'm glad to see you and Paris again. How do we drive? Omnibus or barouche? Barouche, eh? And the baggage by cab? This gentleman's also."

Quaintance was protesting vehemently to Madame Cornoyer that he could not avail himself of such hospitality, but quite in vain until that question was settled for them by a most unlooked-for arbiter. O'Ferral came quietly forward, and at sight of him Cornoyer was moved to the utmost excess of rapture while Madame Cornoyer welcomed him warmly as an old friend. Quaintance was inwardly overjoyed to see him, but shook hands stolidly, after the fashion of the Anglo-Saxon. And then the argument was renewed till O'Ferral informed them that he had already made all arrangements for the newcomer's accommodation. Whereupon Cornoyer expressed grave dissatisfaction with him and his high-handed methods, but, having made careful record of his address, drove off, content, with his mother.

"What in creation are you doing here?" Quaintance asked, once more wringing his friend's hand as they went forward to claim his belongings. "You're the most unexpected sort of fellow I ever came across! How did you know I'd be here to-day? Was it chance that brought you along in the nick of time, or——"

"The simplest thing in the world," O'Ferral explained. "Our Paris edition publishes a list of passengers leaving New York for these parts. So that I knew several days ago when and where I might look for you. What's brought you over here, eh?"

"It's a good thing I didn't come on in my car from Cherbourg," said Quaintance. "I should have, if I hadn't been in a bit of a hurry. You haven't seen or heard anything of—of that girl of mine on this side, have you?"

"Not a sign of her. Is she here?"

"She sailed the day before I did," Quaintance asserted, and, having at length secured his baggage and set out for the Rue St. Roch, where O'Ferral had his quarters, he plunged into a full and true account of his surprising adventures in that connection since he had last seen the correspondent. He had not yet concluded when they reached the rooms on which his friend had taken an option for him, and no more was said while his trunks were being conveyed to the snug entresol suite adjoining O'Ferral's own apartment, into which they presently repaired, and Quaintance resumed.

"I think she intended to give me the slip. It was by the purest chance I hit the right trail. I went down to the dock to see Cornoyer off, but he was late, as usual. The boat sailed just as we got there, and—the girl was on board. I saw her. She came on deck as it started."

"Sure it was she?"

"I'll stake my oath on that. I'd know her in the dark."

"There's the list of arrivals for ten days past." O'Ferral proffered him a paper and pointed out a long column of names, which Quaintance fell to perusing with silent avidity.

"Might be any one of a dozen who have 'and maid' attached to their names," he remarked doubtfully, "but I'll tell you who I think she must be. Miss Lorraine. Miss Lorraine and maid. Mrs. Smith's her maid, I'll be bound—and she's Dagmar Lorraine. Yes, that's it, sure. Dagmar Lorraine."

He lingered over the name as though it tickled his ears, and O'Ferral, confirmed bachelor, smiled to himself.

"Then the next thing to do," he opined, "is to find Miss Dagmar Lorraine, who is probably someone else altogether. You go too fast, Steve. Brake down a little till you're more certain of your premises. It won't do, you know, to go butting in on some entire stranger with no better introduction than some other stranger's bracelet. Don't give way to every rash impulse."

Quaintance threw the paper at him and helped himself to a drink. He was in good spirits again, and greatly delighted to have such a comrade as the correspondent once more at his elbow.

"Confound it!" he cried. "If I hadn't stifled my impulses so successfully, I wouldn't be in any such muddle now. I kept on telling myself to go slow all the time, and you see the result. I get left."

"Well, we'll see what we can do," cried O'Ferral. "Where are we going to dine? I'm free for this evening. To-morrow we're booked to Cornoyer, and, after that, as fate decides. I hope to be here for a few days longer, since you've turned up, but I may have to start for somewhere else at a moment's notice."

"Let's dine at the Anglais," Quaintance suggested, "and go on to a theatre. I'm hungry for light and life again. The sea made me feel as if I were back in Africa."

They changed their clothes and carried out that programme, but, among the many pretty women they saw during dinner, and afterwards from their fauteuils at the Gymnase, Quaintance could catch no glimpse of that fair face whose eyes had brought him over seas, that slender, gracious figure which swept through all his dreams like some stately old-world duchess. He grew restless and distrait. O'Ferral took him off to supper at the Café de Paris, but with no better result, and they returned to the Rue St. Roch at an hour which gave the concierge there a high opinion of their habits.

For the next few days they lived a bustling life in conjunction with Cornoyer, but Quaintance found time withal to prosecute his assiduous search, and O'Ferral did all he could to aid him. But they could find no faintest trace of Dagmar Lorraine.

Quaintance had even thoughts of advertising for the owner of the bracelet, but finally decided not to do so, since he could not well plead ignorance of her desire regarding it. He presently took to his car again, and patrolled Paris both within and without the walls, in the vain hope that fortune might once more favor him through that medium.

One afternoon he drove Madame Cornoyer and her hopeful son to Auteuil, where there was a steeple-chase meeting at which he could count on seeing a good many members of the English and American colonies in the French capital. There were graceful beauties of many nations in gorgeous gowns on the grand stand, where Cornoyer dutifully established his mother amid a laughing circle of friends ere carrying Quaintance off to the paddock, but none to compare, in the American's mind, with the simple maiden he had found barefoot on the seashore. At thought of that brief, unforgettable moment he heaved a great sigh, and, looking round, half afraid that his mischievous friend might have heard it, found that Cornoyer had deserted him. That earnest sportsman was running hither and thither, between owners, jockeys, and the booths of the pari-mutuel. And Quaintance was not sorry to be left alone for a little.

He was wandering up and down disconsolately, puffing a cigarette, not much interested in the race on hand, when he saw a familiar face in the throng and almost immediately lost it again. It was that of a man, but he could not at once recall where he had last seen it, until like a flash there came to him the resemblance of one in a light tweed suit and a panama who had shown a suspicious interest in the shutters of the bungalow on Peconic Bay.

It cost him two or three precious minutes to find Cornoyer, and, when he at length discovered him, it was too late to trace the unknown. He described that individual as well as he could, but the broad details which were all he could well supply were insufficient for any identification. Cornoyer cudgelled his brains to fit the right name to them, but, after he had suggested a dozen whose owners distinctly resembled the person pictured, Quaintance gave that chance up as lost. He felt dull and disappointed as he returned to the city with a gay party in the tonneau, since to have found out who the man was might have been of assistance incalculable in locating the girl. And fortunately O'Ferral was at home, ready to condole with him over such mishap.

"I wish I could have dodged this reception to-night," said Quaintance, as they sat smoking together in the correspondent's rooms after dinner. I don't feel in tune for festivity."

"Brace up!" urged his friend. "You can never tell when or where your luck may be going to change. You might easily meet Miss Lorraine—or that man—at the Elysée. Brace up! Don't lose your grip on the game!"

"Oh, I'm not standing out for a moment," Quaintance declared. "I'll play my hand to a finish before I quit. What time do we start?"

"In about half an hour. I want to be on the spot early, if you don't mind."

In half an hour therefore they drove along to the

Palace, there to attend the function for which Mme. Cornoyer, at her son's instigation, had got Quaintance a card, while O'Ferral had received his from an official source. The correspondent was *persona grata*, on his own merits as much as owing to his professional standing, with many of those in high places, but they were not unaware that the unobtrusive young man who now and then passed through Paris without attracting other attention than theirs, was the trusted representative of a power beyond that wielded by any ruler.

Quaintance had revived outwardly by the way, and, having been duly presented to his official host, who also greeted O'Ferral with a grave cordiality, passed on into the grand reception room, looking about him with lively interest.

The scene there was a very brilliant one, and he felt well repaid for the effort of will power which it had cost him to come. He drew the correspondent to one side and they took up an inconspicuous position beside one of the four great pillars which formed a quadrangle between the ante-room and the long salon whither most of the guests were repairing. Thence they commanded a clear view of the lofty, curtained entrance where two resplendent *huissiers* were admitting each new arrival after resonant announcement of his or her title or style.

The chandeliers overhead lent added glory to the magnificently frescoed ceiling and lit up a blaze of color below. Soldiers, sailors, and diplomats outvied each other in blue, and scarlet, and gold, while the gleam of bare shoulders, the varied hues of the women's ravishing toilettes, set off by the sombre black coats of those men who did not wear uniform, blended with them in a rainbow-like harmony.

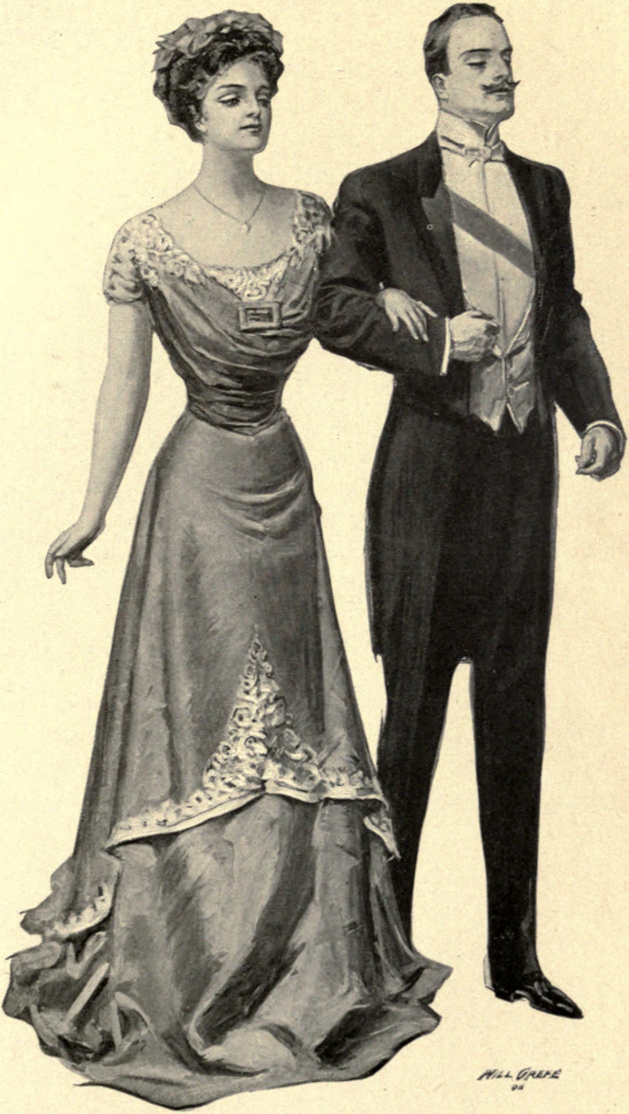
It was not yet late, and the spacious chambers would be still more crowded presently. Quaintance looked in vain for any known face among those within his range of vision, and then turned to where the ushers were introducing a steady stream of equally radiant humanity. The Cornoyers had not so far put in an appearance, and he must pay his respects to Madame as soon as she should have passed the President. Thereafter he might leave when opportunity offered, and he did not mean to remain very long.

He saw the British Ambassador enter and then there was a lull in the inflow. O'Ferral's eyes had been busy, but the correspondent, beyond pointing out one or two notabilities, had had little to say, and Quaintance, against his pillar, able, because of his height, to overlook the spectacle at his ease, had fallen into a reverie. His glance was still idly fixed on the curtains which had been let fall behind the Englishman, when the *huissier's* voice once more resounded, slow but distinctly, above the incessant buzz of the conversation, the rippling accompaniment of laughter in bass and treble.

"*Monsieur le Duc—et Madame la Duchesse des Rêves,*" said the man, very sonorously, and the silken screens swung apart.

A strange hush fell on the ante-room and extended to the larger salon as the couple thus announced came forward from between two lines of bowing lackeys, all eyes upon them.

"Des Rêves has certainly succeeded in surprising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"MONSIEUR LE DUC ET MADAME LA DUCHESSE DES RÊVES"

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us!" whispered a man at Quaintance's right hand, and raised himself on tiptoe.

Quaintance had ceased to breathe. His lips were bloodless, compressed. He stood immobile, stricken, staring. Where had he seen the Duc before? Once at the bungalow on Long Island, and yet again that morning at Auteuil. And the Duchesse? Ah! It was that which hurt.

She was dressed in purple velvet. Her neck and arms and shoulders, her fair, sweet face, from which the wild roses had fled, were all of a tint with that texture. She was holding her proud head high. Her blue eyes were very sombre as she and her husband stopped where the President stood, while all about them babel went on again as though it had never been suspended.

"Hold up, old chap!" said O'Ferral, for Quaintance had clutched at his arm, was swaying, with bent knees, like one on shipboard. His features were grey and drawn. The blow had been cruelly sudden, and was so crushing. It seemed as though the very light of life had been snuffed out in him. His lips twitched. He was speaking, in a low, broken tone.

"*Monsieur le Duc—et Madame la Duchesse des Rêves!* The Duchess of Dreams—my Dagmar! God!

"I'm going away now. I'm going away, O'Ferral."

CHAPTER XVI

HOW MONSIEUR FARED IN THE RUE DES TROIS FRERES

Of the three men who, from such widely different motives, had spared no pains in pursuit of her whom Quaintance now knew as Dagmar, Duchesse des Rêves, Monsieur le Duc was the last to reach Paris, and that in no over-violent hurry. For, while he may not have wielded such wide powers as Fanchette credited him with, he had always found that his rank in life carried with it advantages denied to individuals less fortunately situated. When the ever-watchful Jules had brought him breathless word of the Duchesse's final flight, a cable message from New York had served to set in motion that machinery by means of which she was to be detained in Paris for him. And so secure had he been as to its efficacy in that respect, that he had not in any way hastened his own departure.

But, by the time he reached his ornate bachelor apartment in the Rue St. Honoré, he had forgotten the fair cause of that delay, was all impatience to behold her who awaited him. He sat down at his telephone and called up the Palais de Justice.

The creature who had served his purpose there was one Tissot-Latour, an aspirant for social recognition and very ready to oblige a duke. M. Tissot-Latour was out, it seemed, but Monsieur's urgent message would be delivered to him immediately on his return, which would not be until late afternoon or early evening. Monsieur gave vent to his annoyance by cursing Jules Chevrel when he appeared, and then demanded of that unmoved functionary how he might best amuse himself during the intervening hours.

Jules, who was in not a few respects an admirable servant, had foreseen some such demand on his ingenuity and was prepared to meet it with a well-filled programme of all that Paris offered in the way of entertainment. Monsieur decided on the steeplechases at Auteuil, and, having once more breakfasted at his usual restaurant—he always ate with better appetite in public than at any of his clubs—set forth for the racecourse in his most dashing motor, a scarlet car which he affected in society, taking Jules with him as chauffeur.

He was in a restless frame of mind, and, after a turn through the paddock, where he met but few acquaintances and they busily occupied, he sought and found Jules active at the betting booths, bade that aggrieved and sulky speculator drive him back to the boulevards forthwith. There he left the red car at its garage, and sent his valet about those duties from which he had so lately released him, while he himself passed the afternoon in a moody and aimless promenade.

Tissot-Latour was seated in the smoking room when he returned to the Rue St. Honoré, a little vulgar, over-dressed man, plebeian of body as mind, who rose as Monsieur entered, and greeted him effusively.

"Have you brought the address?" the Duc asked bluntly, cutting him short in a long string of compliments and questions.

"Certainly," replied his tool. "You know that I am at your service, Etienne, and—here it is."

"Rue des Trois Frères," said Monsieur to himself, as he took the card proffered him. "What under heaven took her to Montmartre!

"Jules! Phone to the stable to send the landau here at once. Or no, the barouche will be better. And at once.

"What's that, Latour? A card from M. le Président's reception. Oh, very well. I'll see what I can do about it, if I remember."

"That was no easy task you set me, Etienne," the other told him, affecting to change the conversation but inwardly much piqued by Monsieur's cavalier acceptance of his good offices. "It would have been extremely awkward for me if the head of my department had got an inkling of the use to which I put his *mandat*, to oblige you."

"My dear chap," Monsieur retorted, and, at the familiar form of his address, Tissot-Latour wriggled delightedly, "there was not the slightest risk to you. The lady presented herself under one which is not her lawful appellation, and that was in itself sufficient to justify you in detaining her. And she has made no protest, in any case, which lets you out. I don't act without knowing where I stand, and you will never get into a scrape through me.

"Here, help yourself, and—excuse me a moment."

He pushed the tantalus across the table, and left his ally deeply gratified by his curt explanation and the brusque lack of ceremony he displayed. Was it not thus that the aristocracy treated their intimates, thought Tissot-Latour, dishonest offspring of a dishonest dealer in hides and horns. He even entertained some faint hope that Monsieur might seek his company in the ducal barouche, and would have been proud beyond words to show himself therein, but that was doomed to disappointment and he was sent about his business as soon as the great vehicle with its two champing greys appeared, at speed, from the Faubourg St. Germain. Monsieur drove off in solitary state after a last word with his jackal.

"Is there a man on watch?" he asked.

"There has been one since I had surveillance established," replied the other pompously. "You won't forget my card for the reception, will you, Etienne, *mon cher?*"

"'Phone me about it later," Monsieur called back to him and, "Confound the fellow's impudent familiarity!" he muttered to himself.

The concierge at Number 40-bis in the Rue des Trois Frères chuckled explosively when he beheld the fashionable equipage stop opposite his door.

"*Voici!*" said he, when he had got his breath back. "I prophesied that there would happen something presently, and here we have the confirmation of my words. The wealthy prince arrives, in an expensive chariot. He is a young man, this one, and of appearance irreproachable. He stops to question the dragon he has employed to guard his treasure. And now André will no doubt earn some small gratuity.

"*Oui, Monsieur.* Number 40-bis. What name? Mdlle. Lorraine. Yes, she is indoors, on the second floor. Permit me to go first that I may show you."

It was Fanchette who first caught sight of Monsieur's carriage as it stopped almost opposite the window she was gazing from, and so extreme was her alarm in consequence that she could only point to it, while her lips moved without a sound. The girl and she had just returned from their excursion to the Avenue Marceau, had been discussing the advisability of flight from the Rue des Trois Frères because of their unfortunate encounter with Dirck Arendsen.

That individual had introduced himself to them, even as Miss Sophia had observed, first as a fellow passenger of theirs upon the steamer, in which guise they had already recognized him, and then as a dear friend of the self-styled Stephen Quaintance, who was, he averred, searching the city high and low for his errant cousin. He had proved so determinedly insistent that the girl had at length complied with his request for her present address, and she felt glad that she had not yielded to the temptation to mislead him, when Fanchette, looking back as they turned in at the street door, saw that he had followed them thither at a respectful distance. He had set off hot-foot immediately he was thus satisfied that it was safe to do so, and might now be back at any moment with one of the two men they were most anxious to escape. And, in the meantime, came the other.

"It is Monsieur," the girl said listlessly, after she had found out what had so frightened Fanchette. The hour she herself had been dreading for so long had come, but it found her with senses dulled by anticipation.

"It is Monsieur. You must be brave now, Fanchette. And do not leave me for an instant. See, I have something here which will speak for us if our own voices are not loud enough."

She slipped one hand into a pocket of the coat she was still wearing and brought out the revolver which had served her in such good stead on the occasion of her night journey from New York to Stormport. It was an idle exhibition, and yet achieved its object. Fanchette took heart of grace, and did not feel herself so utterly at Monsieur's mercy.

"Sit down," the girl said quietly, and, when André knocked, she herself threw the door wide, motioned to Monsieur that he might come in. He did so, deferentially, hat in hand, speaking no word until his sharp-eyed guide had once more been shot out. And then,

"Dagmar!" he said imploringly.

She scanned him closely for a moment, and saw that he had not changed. Almost a twelvemonth had gone by since that dark night on which she had fled from him, leaving behind, in token of her desperate resolve, the wedding ring which he had placed upon her finger an hour before. Ah! Had she but known in time, had her eyes not been so innocently blind to the brand she could see so plainly now on his smooth forehead. She had once thought him handsome—and believed in him—and trusted him implicitly. And insight into his true character had come to her only an hour too late!

He met her gaze with a tragic humility, such as would at one time have stood him in good stead with her, finding her even fairer, still more to be desired than he had deemed her. She was no longer the unsophisticated girl whom he, with his wide knowledge of the world, had thought he might still bring to book for her behavior. The lines of a graver experience showed at the corners of her perfect lips and nostrils. She was a woman now, and altogether lovely, this, his as yet unkissed Duchesse.

"Dagmar!" he said imploringly, and, although it hurt her to have him call her by that name, she could not help herself. While he confined himself to that, she could not check him. She did not answer, but stood there waiting, her head back, her face expressionless, at bay.

"Dagmar," he said, "I have come here to plead with you. Will you not send your maid away, and let me speak? I beg that you will hear me, and—think! Am I not your husband?"

"Was what that woman told me at the church door true?" she asked him, in a tone at which he winced as though it had been a whip-lash, ignoring his objection to her woman's presence.

He bit his lip, counting the chances that a lie might pass, but knew that nothing but the truth would serve him.

"It was true, to my shame," he said. "But listen, Dagmar. I was no more than a boy then, and—she entrapped me. That happens to so many of us.

"No, I do not seek to excuse myself at her expense. I only pray you to be lenient with me. It was not altogether my fault, and——"

"It *was* true," she broke in, not scornfully but in a voice which hurt him more than would have the scorn he deserved, "and I am glad that you do not deny it, else I should have to count you coward as well as—— But, never mind. I have no wish to judge you. It *was* true—and yet you call yourself my husband!"

He would have spoken, but she held a hand up and so silenced him.

"You were a poor man when I married you," she went on swiftly. "I did not know that you would one day be Duc des Rêves, and I—God help me!—I believed you loved me. In that I was content.

"You married me believing me to be a rich man's heiress, and for the sake of what you might get with me."

He would have cried denial if he could, but remained speechless, with bent head.

"I could have told you then that he was dead, and that his millions would all go elsewhere if I should marry you, but—I believed you loved me!

"I went to you, on impulse and in haste. There was no time for explanations. And, on the church steps I found out——

"You are my husband, as you say,—but in name only, and because it was too late then to remedy our mutual mistakes. And there the matter rests. It shall rest there thought it cost me my life to fight men's laws."

His hot eyes met hers for a moment, and he knew then that he might neither bend nor break her will to his. She was so very beautiful in her disdain, defying him through life to death itself, that he repented in that instant and more bitterly than he could have thought possible a past more soiled and black than she might even imagine. A swift self-pity overcame him as he foresaw what forfeit fate was going to exact. If he had only had a chance to live a decent life! Had he but been brought up on different lines! For her sake he would fain have been a boy again, with a clean page on which to write his history. But he could by no means erase the evil record of his youth. He bowed his head still lower, because his eyes were dim and could not meet hers as her husband's must.

For a few seconds he stayed thus. Then he looked up again, his mind once more at work on possibilities. For her sake, even at that late hour, he might do much. He was yet young, in years. If he should prove himself more worthy of her, she was too generous of heart not to reward him. Such grace as she might grant him in the meantime he would take from her most thankfully.

She was his wife—in name, this pure, proud beauty who despised him and his coronet. No other man might win her. He must, in the first place, make terms of outward amity, and then—trust time.

"Listen, then," he requested eagerly. "While you are my wife—in name, it is scarce seemly that we should live thus, as open enemies. I have not ceased to seek you since you left me, and now we shall surely be able to come to some arrangement which will give us both greater peace of mind.

"I am well off since I fell heir to my old uncle's vineyards at Les Rêves. La Roche-Segur and the Chateau des Rêves of course came to me with the title. You will not refuse from me that which is your due.

"It may be, too, that my life will not be over-long, in which case it would be well that you were recognized as Duchesse des Rêves without further delay. I do not speak thus to affect you to pity, but my doctors tell me that I need not lay up any provision against old age.

"Would it not please you to establish yourself in the Hôtel des Rêves, while I remain in my own quarters on this side of the river? I give you my word that I shall not molest you in any way, and you may bid your people refuse me admission if I so much as approach the palace without first obtaining your leave. I only ask you to bear with me now and then at such social engagements as you may see fit to attend. Make any conditions you please—I agree to them all in advance. And I solemnly promise that you will have no further cause to complain of my conduct."

His voice shook slightly, so earnest was his appeal, and the girl had heard it with close attention. She was no less anxious than he to attain some less harassing mode of life than had been her lot of late, to find some safe refuge from this Stephen Quaintance whose most unexpected arrival had so disturbed her. And it did not take her long to make up her mind.

"It shall be as you wish," she said deliberately. "But only for such time as you shall respect your promise."

"I shall break no more promises," he assured her eagerly, all that was evil in his handsome face for the nonce obliterated under the spell of her gracious presence, looking more like the gallant gentleman he might have been than old Fanchette had ever seen him before.

"I shall break no more promises, and I hope that you will one day be able to think less harshly of me. When will it suit you to remove to your hôtel?"

"Now, at once."

"Your carriage waits. May I escort you?"

She shook her head.

"Fanchette will go with me."

He bowed, choking down his chagrin, schooling himself to prompt obedience since it was only by such means that he might gain her confidence.

"Then I may take my leave. And, Dagmar,—believe me, I am very grateful to you."

"I only seek to do what I see to be right," she answered briefly.

He lingered on the threshold, not daring even to hold out his hand, and she took no least step toward him.

"Will you permit me to make known our marriage?" he asked most humbly, and Fanchette could scarcely recognize in such a timid suppliant, the haughty Duc des Rêves, Vicomte Aiglemont and Seigneur de la Roche-Segur.

"To-night there is a reception at the Elysée," he went on hurriedly. "All Paris will be present. If you care to accompany me, it would be very opportune to announce it then. I have just landed from New York. My friends would assume that we had met and married there, which would save gossip. We need not undeceive them."

"Very well," she agreed, willing to avoid needless notoriety if that were possible, and he withdrew, sufficiently well pleased.

Dagmar, Duchesse des Rêves, heard him go downstairs with dragging feet, and sank into a chair, a tired sigh on her trembling lips.

"I could not but surrender, Fanchette," she said drearily. "There was no other way, and——"

Fanchette enfolded her in two strong arms.

"You have done well, dear heart," she whispered, her tone a caress, holding the quivering form close in her grasp. "You have done well, and—it is best so. Forget the past. Think no more of what might have been."

Presently Fanchette set to her packing, her mistress helping her so that they might not lose a single moment in making their escape from other callers. The footman came up from the carriage to ask orders, and him they sent to find a cab, by which their baggage was sent on ahead of them. Then they descended and drove off in the more imposing equipage, amid the open curiosity of the Rue des Trois Frères.

André especially was interested, and although Fanchette had feed him liberally for such small services as he had rendered, he could not find it in him to forgive her the rejection of his proffered comradeship. He dropped her gold piece beside that the Duke had given him, and spoke sarcastically.

"Ohé!" said he from his post on the doorstep, "Ohé, old tongue of vinegar, is it thus thou wouldst salve sour speeches? A pleasant word is sometimes worth more than a gold piece, hein! And it may be that we have not yet heard the last of thee and thy fair mistress. Where there is honey one may see more than a single fly."

Nor was it long before events justified him in his premonition, for, a short hour after the two had fled, there came to the Rue des Trois Frères in a great hurry a tall, fair man with bloodshot, quarrelsome eyes, and a dark fellow wearing a great black beard and moustache. In whom André discovered a fresh source of revenue, but only after he had proved to them that it was not his fault that the girl had gone. He made high terms with them, and having taken payment for his information in advance, told them how they might find her, chuckling wheezily the while.

"You must ask the great Duc des Rêves where she is now," he explained slowly, relishing their impatience of his drawl, "and when you see him you will also see the wickedest aristocrat that we have left in France. Many a pretty bird he's netted, that same gentleman, and now he has her in his toils, the prettiest of them all.

"Yes, she went off in his carriage, scarcely an hour ago. But he set out on foot, to save scandal! As if any fresh scandal would affect *his* reputation!

"That is the clue you have paid for, messieurs, and cheap at the price, as you will find if you follow it up. I may add, for your edification, that mademoiselle wears no rings."

He winked waggishly at the tall, fair man, with quite unexpected results. For that individual suddenly picked him up by the seat of his trousers and his coat collar, and cast him untenderly into his littered den underneath the stairs. The door was shut upon André and his anguished outcry, the key turned in the lock and withdrawn. His assailant pocketed it, and then departed wth the dark, black-bearded man, who had looked on unmoved.

CHAPTER XVII

BLACK DIRCK ADOPTS STRONG MEASURES

"Well?" Arendsen asked, in no pleasant tone, as Seager and he set off at a smart pace down the street. He had not understood much of the conversation which had taken place, but inferred from that worthy's treatment of the over-voluble André that their visit had been in vain, that the girl had again eluded them.

He and his ally had also made most assiduous search for her since they had left the Hôtel du Palais. They had secured convenient quarters on the Isle de la Cité, and then scoured Paris, systematically, but without result until that afternoon, when he had suddenly been inspired to call by himself for the two old maids in the Avenue Marceau, to see what he could find out from them on his own account. There were only three days left in which to win or lose the enormous stake for which he was now prepared to back Seager to a finish. Great had been his elation, therefore, when he had met the girl herself leaving the Misses Winters'.

He had cursed bitterly afterwards, in the first place because he had not taken his accomplice with him, and then because he had not trusted her to tell the truth when she had at length and with unfeigned reluctance given him her address for her over-affectionate cousin. Had he not wasted time in tracking her thereto, he might still have got Seager to the spot in time to intercept her. As it was, it had cost him so long to discover that untrustworthy wanderer, that she had escaped them again in the interim. It was very galling to have been so near success, to be once more baffled.

"Well?" he asked wrathfully. "What's doing? Did you find out ——"

"She's gone off with the Duc des Rêves," snapped Seager, his voice no less vicious. "I don't suppose she knows that he's one of the greatest scoundrels unhung. I'm going to get her back from him, and, if he'll only stand up to me, I'll break his noble neck with a great deal of pleasure. Here's a cab. Yes, I know where we're going. Don't you interfere."

Than that, Arendsen could get no more out of him, but was content in seeing him thus spurred to action. Lately, and fretting under repeated failure, he had been drinking a good deal again, was in too dangerous a mood to stand nagging. Silence obtained between them during the long drive from the Rue des Trois Frères to the Faubourg St. Germain. Seager knew that the Duc des Rêves had his hôtel somewhere within the city, and meant to seek him out there. The cabby could be trusted to take them to it.

He did so, and would have turned into the carriage entrance of the great mansion on the Boulevard but that two stalwart men in the ducal livery sprang forward and seized the horse's head.

"Is this the place?" Seager asked, and jumped out. "Pay the cab off, Arendsen," he ordered, over his shoulder, and walked up to the nearest gate-keeper.

"I want to see the Duc des Rêves," he said abruptly.

A more conciliatory manner would probably have evoked a pleasanter reply. He would have been informed that M. le Duc might be found at his town address, in the Rue St. Honoré. As it was the man responded with equal brevity.

"That is impossible."

"Then it must be made possible," Seager insisted hotly. "I've come here to see him, and see him I will."

"You are welcome to wait."

Meantime Arendsen had dismissed the cab and confronted the other official, with whom he exchanged a few words in such French as he could command.

"Don't lose your rag!" he called over to his companion. "The Duc's not at home. It's not him we want, anyway."

It did not soothe Seager to think he had been made a fool of by a mere lackey. But he gulped his anger down for the time being.

"If the Duc isn't in," he said more smoothly, "I'll see Miss Lorraine."

"That is also impossible, said the man stubbornly, but his companion was more politic.

"There is no such person here," he asserted.

Their joint reply enraged Seager beyond measure.

"Stand aside," he commanded, and made as if he would have pushed past between them, ignoring all Arendsen's cautions.

The gate-keepers had been instructed that no one should enter except by express permission of the Duchesse. They did not hesitate to withstand this irritable, overbearing foreigner. He struck at one and a fracas began which ended in his being ignominiously ejected, while Arendsen once more looked on inactively, not thinking it worth his while to interfere further. Then the great gates were rolled into place and their two guardians disappeared within the gate-lodge to rid themselves of the traces of conflict.

Arendsen went across to the gutter in which their aggressor was lying, half stunned, and, having first revived him by the old deep-sea method of biting one of his thumbs savagely, got him on to his feet again. When Seager recovered his senses he would forthwith have besieged the hôtel des Rêves, but his confederate at last succeeded in restraining him from such immediate folly, and they were still swearing hoarsely at one another when there stepped forward from the shadow of a near tree a stout, sharp-featured individual who made some essay to soothe them.

"Monsieur has been outrageously maltreated," he said in French to Seager. "Did I hear rightly that he asked for Mdlle. Lorraine?"

"Who the devil are you?" asked his protégé, much astonished by his unexpected appearance and not at all appreciating his sympathy. "What business is it of yours who I asked for?"

"I might prove a friend, if Monsieur would only permit me," the unknown protested smoothly. "It may be that I can serve Monsieur. My name is Chevrel, Jules Chevrel. I was formerly in the confidence of M. le Duc des Rêves. I also sought the honor of an interview with Mdlle. Lorraine, and was turned away with contumely."

"You were, eh? Well—" Seager looked him over again—"We'd better get out of this. No use of butting against stone walls. Join me in a brandy-and-soda, and we'll have a chat. We may be able to do something for each other.

"Come on, Arendsen. I know a poison-dispensary not many blocks from here, and I want a wash-down badly."

He spoke peremptorily, and the others followed him without demur. A few minutes later the gates of the hôtel des Rêves were thrown wide open again.

A short walk took the three conspirators into the Quartier Latin, to a blind alley known as the Impasse de Paradis, where Seager ushered them into a modest brasserie bearing the no less curious cognomen of the Blue Rabbit. The grey-haired host of that retiring establishment did not seem overjoyed to see him, but said no word of good or bad, even when he tossed a ten-franc piece on the pewter counter and passed through to an interior and still more private apartment.

The Brasserie of the Blue Rabbit was but sparsely patronized at that hour and they found its sanctum quite empty. There they installed themselves at a corner table, and, having given a sleepy waiter an order for absinthe, and brandy, and beer, tried some preliminary tricks of fence until it was quite clear to all that all were rogues, without a scruple among them. Then the glasses were replenished, at Seager's order, and they began to talk business.

"Look you, gentlemen," said Jules Chevrel, after he had swallowed the greater portion of the opalescent liquor the waiter had just brought him, an example which Seager was prompt to follow, "I have a plan. If you will pay for it you may have an interview with the lady to-night. But in calculating the payment, you must remember two points. These are, first, the sacrifice of my own interests, to further yours, and then the fact that this may be the last chance you or I will have.

To-morrow she may be on her way to La Roche-Segur, or the Chateau des Rêves, or London, or Rome, or Vienna. Monsieur my late employer is a man of many strange caprices. There is but this one opportunity to be counted upon, and I value it very highly."

"Put a price on it," Seager retorted bluntly. "If that's not too steep, and the plan's all right, we can probably do a deal."

Arendsen looked extremely uncomfortable while Jules Chevrel was making a quick mental calculation. Seager's cavalier method of discussing money matters irked him more than a little. The Frenchman gathered from his sullen scowl that it must be he who held the key of their treasury.

The worthy Jules had amassed a modest fortune of some ninety thousand francs, including the five thousand of which he had mulcted Madame la Duchesse in New York, during the few years which had elapsed since he first entered Monsieur's service, and it was his present ambition to increase that sum to six figures, when he would at once discharge himself without warning. To that end he had intended to extort ten thousand more from Madame, under threat that he would otherwise feel it his duty to tell the Duc how she had spent one afternoon in New York and dined at Martin's with her husband's valet. Either she or Monsieur himself, to whom he already referred as his late employer, must pay to suppress that story. But he had been foiled in his effort to get speech with the Duchesse, and—Monsieur might prove dangerous.

Meantime here were two providential Americans, no doubt wealthy, who did not seem to know that this Miss Lorraine in whom they were so deeply interested was really the Duchesse des Rêves. And he certainly had no object in undeceiving them. If they would pay him the ten thousand francs he required from some quarter or other and no matter how, it would be a simple matter to give up in their favor his further plan for interviewing Madame. It would do her no harm to meet two of her countrymen for half an hour, and they would bear in his place the brunt of any resultant unpleasantness. He abruptly opened negotiations at fifteen thousand francs.

Arendsen almost cried out in horror, but Seager laid a restraining hand on his arm and nodded sagaciously. From his point of view three thousand dollars was an altogether infinitesimal sum compared with what it would bring them. And his brain, simulated by the brandy he had imbibed, was busy now. He had already conceived a scheme which must make success quite certain, if they could but reach the girl.

"Spit out the plan," he commanded, and Jules Chevrel could have gnashed his teeth for that he had not asked more, while Arendsen only contained himself with a visible effort and in response to a warning pressure from his accomplice.

"If it's a sound one," he commanded, "I'll tack on a bonus of the same amount. So that you'll stand in with us to the tune of thirty thousand francs. There's nothing mean about poor old Dom—Stephen Quaintance."

He coughed, and stared fixedly at the Frenchman.

Jules Chevrel leaned across the marble-topped table, and spoke in a low, rapid voice.

"To-night," he explained, "she will go to the Elysée. There is a soirée at the palace to which the Duc has promised to take her. She will drive there alone in her carriage, and it will return to the hôtel.

"Now, mark. Although I was turned away from its gates just now, I have friends within. The head-coachman is one. He has only a single match-pair in his stable at present, since Monsieur has been abroad for some time, and one of them will fall sick at a late hour. In despair he will telephone Monsieur's garage to send an automobile to the palace in place of the carriage. The chauffeur will be well out of the way, but—I shall be there at the time. And ready, as I always am, to oblige a friend.

"Can you handle an automobile?"

Seager nodded again, and rose from the table.

"I think we can make a deal of it," he remarked with brisk complacence. "You will excuse us for ten minutes, M. Chevrel? No, we're not gong to beat it—it would be easy to get up and go, if we wished—and I want you to wait here till we return."

"I am not afraid," Jules Chevrel assured him with bland untruthfulness. "I shall wait fifteen—no, twenty minutes for you, until eight o'clock. You will be back by then. I must leave you in time to see the carriage start from the hôtel des Rêves, so that I may be sure she goes with it."

Arendsen was so overcome by his feelings that he could scarce speak when they reached the street, but Seager was jubilant.

"Don't lose your wool," he advised, and dragged his confederate hurriedly down the Impasse de Paradis, toward its blind end.

"Never mind about the money just now. I've got the whole thing mapped out to a finish and you'll get it back with good interest. No, I'm not robbing you. Damn it, man! you must sow before you can reap."

At the darkest corner of the dark Impasse he stopped before an almost invisible postern, and after much hasty fumbling produced from his pockets a key with which he opened that. Arendsen followed him, still muttering, into a passage black as the pit, and, after Seager had closed the door carefully, he caught at his confederate's sleeve, leading him forward with assured footsteps.

They passed through other unbolted doors, crossed a wooden floor and climbed many flights of stairs, but no more was said till they stopped at the top in a dim and shadowy space under a huge skylight.

"This is the hôtel de Seager and Quaintance," said Seager, grinning, as he struck a match and lit a couple of candles on a shelf behind the door. Arendsen looked round blinkingly, and saw that they were in a dusty and untenanted but comfortably furnished studio. And, before he could ask any questions, the other went on,

"I lived here for nearly a week when my money went done. It's an empty house, and hasn't been let for years, so that it was easy to get the keys to inspect it and have a skeleton made before I returned them. This room's as safe as a padded cell. The buildings all round are warehouses and deposits. We're a couple of stories above the highest of them. Once we get her upstairs our troubles are at an end, and we're going to get her upstairs to-night even if it does cost us three thousand dollars. Now, do you understand?"

Arendsen glanced quickly about him again. There was no possibility of escape through the skylight. It was too lofty. The windowless walls were solid, the door was sufficiently massive and there was a second door standing open between them and the top of the stairs. The place had been planned to ensure seclusion from the outer world, and they could have found none more perfectly suited to their requirements.

"The front door opens on to a lane past the warehouses," Seager stated, "but it will be safer to bring her in by the back. Come on, Arendsen. We'll get back to our rat-faced friend, and fix things so that your three thousand dollars will be well secured. I'm not the sort of fellow to throw money around recklessly, and by to-morrow night we'll both be millionaires!"

He laughed aloud, and Arendsen started nervously at the low, eerie echo which died away through the deserted dwelling.

"It's all right," Seager assured him and blew out the candles. "I know the old shack from cellar to roof-tree, and you might shout long enough before you'd be heard.

"You left me plenty of time to explore it," he added morosely. "I might have been a ghost at this moment for all you——"

"Oh, never mind about that," retorted the other. "I'm paying a cruel price now to help you through, and —look here, you must cut the drink out till the whole business is safely settled. I won't sink a cent more in it unless you'll swear to keep sober."

They were still wrangling on this sore subject when they got back to the brasserie, where they found Jules Chevrel awaiting them, outwardly most indifferent, but in his heart surprised to see them again. Seager refused his offer of further refreshment, and curtly informed him that they had decided to close with his offer.

It was quickly arranged that they should present themselves at M. le Duc's garage shortly before eleven, and he went his way well satisfied.

They spent the intervening hours in making such provision as seemed good to them for the well-being of their prospective prisoner, and, Seager having slaked with a bottle of English soda, a consuming thirst caused by his journeys between the house and the stores he had visited, they crossed the river again about ten, reaching the Rue St. Honoré before the time appointed.

It turned out to be just as well that they had, for an unexpected complication had cropped up. Jules Chevrel's friend, the coachman, had telephoned that the car must call at the hôtel des Rêves for a maid who was to escort her mistress from the Elysée, and he did not know how that would affect the bargain he had made with the Americans.

It was Arendsen who, in the end, reassured him on that point, gave him a cheque for three thousand dollars, and sent him out with Seager to have the latter properly dressed for his part. When they returned he drew his accomplice aside while Chevrel was occupied with the car.

"Bring the maid straight to the back door," he whispered. "Tell her you're going to cross by the Pont Neuf, if she asks questions. I'll be waiting there. Leave the rest to me."

"Right," said Seager briefly, and the other hurried away.

Some twenty minutes before midnight the scarlet limousine turned into the courtyard of the hôtel des Rêves and, having halted at a pillared portico, stood there throbbing impatiently until Fanchette appeared. The door of the closed carriage-body was at the back, and she climbed in at once. Seager set out with her toward the Pont Neuf and then turned to the right, following the less frequented lanes of the Quartier until he reached the Impasse de Paradis, where he drew up within an inch of the blind wall at its dark end.

Scarcely had the wheels ceased to revolve when Arendsen, who had been anxiously awaiting it, sprang in beside Fanchette as she came toward the door in surprise at the stoppage. He had thrown a blanket about her head and shoulders before she could utter a sound, and although she fought desperately to free herself, it was in vain, for Seager had come to the other's assistance. They carried her indoors, and by the time they got her to the foot of the stairs she had ceased to struggle.

"Show a light," Arendsen ordered breathlessly, and, as the other struck a match, he stooped over her, withdrawing the blanket and her long grey cloak.

"She's safe," he muttered, staring into the white, wrinkled face, and Seager sniffed.

"Chloroform!" he commented indifferently, and kicked the blanket to one side. "You're taking strong measures now, Arendsen."

When they came down stairs again, having left her unconscious, safely locked up in the studio, Arendsen had a grey shawl in one hand and he picked her cloak up in passing.

No one seemed to have noticed the car standing there in the shadow. He entered it, after a last look at the gaunt, black building behind him, and Seager drove him at decorous speed toward the Elysée.

CHAPTER XVIII

THE GROOM OF THE GATEWAY IS MUCH AGGRIEVED BY THE SCARLET AUTO

"*Cinquante-deux*," said the groom of the gateway, scanning the card brought him by one of his satellites from the ladies' cloak room. "Number fifty-two, Madame la Duchesse des Rêves, a carriage and pair.

"Is Madame la Duchesse on the way?"

"She was cloaked and bidding good-bye to the Duc when she gave me her ticket," responded the underling, and his superior turned in haste to the quadruple rank of vehicles carefully parked where he could command them.

"*Cinquante-deux*," he cried, in his most imposing and sonorous voice. The order was taken up and repeated at regular intervals along the lines.

"*Cinquante-deux. Numéro cinquante-deux.*"

The groom of the gateway was very proud of his perfect system.

Great was his wrath, therefore, when, in place of the carriage and pair which should have appeared at his word, a dashing scarlet automobile sped forward from among the array of twinkling lamps and stopped at the steps even as Madame la Duchesse came down the long corridor. He darted toward the luckless chauffeur who was driving it.

"*Imbécile!*" he hissed between set teeth. "Didst thou not hear the instruction I gave, 'Number fifty-two'! Hast not thou eyes to read the distinct numerals on thy plainly printed card of exit!"

"*Tais-toi donc, vieux gros,*" growled the man thus berated, and thrust before him a pasteboard bearing the ciphers in question.

"The car has been sent for Madame in place of the carriage."

The groom of the gateway glared at him, but there was no time to vent his displeasure on the insolent mechanic. The Duchesse was coming down the steps and there was a party behind her for whom he had not yet called forward any conveyance. He sprang ponderously to the door at the back of the automobile, opened it and stood bowing beside it that Madame la Duchesse might step in speedily and yet under all ceremony, closed it deftly behind her and uttered the one word, "Forward!" in a tone of thunder. Then he hurried back to where the others were waiting, still swearing under his breath at the scarlet auto which had thus annoyingly interfered with the smooth working of his system. He would soon lose his reputation if M. le Président's guests were to be kept standing on the steps of the palace, even though it were through no fault of his.

And meantime the object of his anathema was making for the Pont de la Concorde, ostensibly on its way to the Boulevard St. Germain.

The Duchesse des Rêves had taken no notice of the change of vehicle, and, if she had, would have thought it but sensible to have a car out at that late hour in place of a pair of horses. Her mind was still preoccupied with the events of the evening as she stepped lightly in and sat down, somewhat wearily, beside Fanchette—who had faced about and was fumbling with a drawn blind. And neither had anything to say until, as the car moved forward, the Duchesse suddenly felt a vise-like arm thrown about her, a cloth was clapped to her lips so that she could not utter a sound . . . . .

When she opened her eyes again Fanchette was bending over her, with a white, horrified face.

"What has happened, Fanchette?" she asked brokenly, conscious of an overpowering languor, a sick sensation of helplessness. She was lying on a low couch, in a room she could not recognize, and when she tried to raise herself that she might look about her she had not the strength. At the sound of her voice, Fanchette's eyes filled with tears of thankfulness.

"Oh, ma'mselle!" cried the woman, her mind divided between relief and despair, still using the old, familiar form of address although her young mistress now wore a wedding-ring openly.

"Oh, ma'mselle! It is that we have been kidnapped. First I, then you. I do not know for what purpose, nor where we are. They brought me here instead of to the Elysée, in M. le Duc's own auto. They drugged me also, but I had partly recovered before they carried you in, and—I was afraid you would not. Oh, ma'mselle! what shall we——"

"Help me to sit up," the Duchesse requested, the clouds clearing from her brain under the shock of such strange intelligence, and, as her maid heaped cushions around her, she stared about her at her surroundings.

The chamber which, if what Fanchette said were correct, was their prison, was an old-fashioned studio with faded furnishings. It looked very gloomy then, with only the light of a single lamp set on a rosewood table beside her, but a lofty skylight showed that it would not be dark in the daytime. The walls were bare, broken by but one door without bolt or handle, and that was closed. She could hear a clock ticking.

"How long have I been here?" she questioned, striving to speak confidently, but her tones trembled in spite of herself.

"Not yet twenty minutes, ma'mselle," Fanchette answered.

"One of them wore your cloak in the car," said the Duchesse as recollection came slowly back to her. "He seized me, and—I could not cry out."

"Because of the chloroform," said Fanchette.

"Help me to my feet," begged her mistress, and, when she had risen, stood for a moment swaying unsteadily.

"Water," she whispered, and drank thirstily when that was brought her.

She took a turn or two round the room, leaning heavily on Fanchette's arm, scanning every corner. Soft footsteps sounded without: some one knocked at the door. They shrank back behind the table, but the Duchesse curbed her alarm sufficiently to answer, "*Entrez.*" It would be well to learn the worst at once. She only regretted that she had so lately abandoned her habit of carrying arms. But she had thought that her troubles were all at an end when she had accepted her husband's protection and the streets of Paris were not like the lonely roads on Long Island.

The door opened slowly, and Dirck Arendsen appeared on the threshold. He looked relieved at sight of the two women standing there, and spoke with a smooth geniality.

"I'm glad to see you looking so well, Miss Lorraine," he said, ignoring all that had gone before, and meeting her stormily anxious eyes with a bluff affectation of openness. "I've been looking forward to introducing your cousin to you—here he is. Stephen, this is Miss Dagmar Lorraine, of whom you have spoken to me. It's a great privilege to be the means of bringing you two together."

He motioned his confederate forward, and Seager entered jauntily, striding up to her with outstretched hand, his coarsely handsome features lit up by what he meant to be a frank smile.

"This is a pleasure I've long looked forward to," he said with florid effusion. "It would have saved us a whole peck of trouble if I'd only known, the last time I met you, that you were Miles Quaintance's daughter."

He stopped, confronting her where she stood beside Fanchette, both hands behind her, her head back, looking him over with a disconcerting air of detachment which presently deepened into contempt as his glance fell before hers: and his face darkened visibly. She had recognized him at once as the man she had met on her long night-journey from New York to Stormport. His methods of dealing with women were quite on a par with those of Miles Quaintance, his uncle.

"I am not Miles Quaintance's daughter," she answered distinctly. "My father's name was Lorraine."

"Yes, yes: I know all about that," he assented with sudden impatience, "and you know well enough too what I mean. The main point is that I'm Stephen

Quaintance, and—send that old woman outside while we talk things over. Arendsen, you can look after her."

For all answer she put an arm through Fanchette's, and Arendsen did not think fit to interfere. He wanted to hear for himself what arrangement was come to between those two, and he was not greatly pleased with these preliminaries.

"Oh, very well," Seager remarked. "Have it your own way. I've nothing to say that I need be ashamed of, and all I desired was to spare your blushes. I suppose you can guess what I've got to tell you?"

He once more assumed his smile, but she shook her head.

"Come, come!" he protested. "You know that you and I have common interests under my uncle's will, don't you? And on what condition? I've taken a lot of trouble to help you to your fair share of ten million dollars, and—I must say I don't think you're treating me very handsomely in return. Sit down, and act sensibly. Don't stand on so much ceremony. I'm not a bad sort of chap, as you'll find out in time, but you mustn't rub me the wrong way too much or I'll scratch."

He threw himself into a chair, pulled a cigarette-case out of his pocket, and struck a match.

"Sit down, and act sensibly," he repeated between puffs, but she remained as she was, very lovely in her disdain, and he looked up again with a scowl which changed to an appreciative leer. Arendsen was still standing sentry beside the closed door. He did not doubt the ultimate outcome of the interview, and only wished that he had been Seager. Fanchette had one of the girl's hands fast in her own, had subdued her own fears for the sake of her mistress. Neither yet quite understood the motive for their abduction, but that was made thoroughly clear, to the Duchesse at least, by her so-called cousin's ensuing remark.

"We've only twenty-four hours left to get married in," he said sullenly, "and we might just as well carry the thing through on a friendly footing. I want——"

"I don't think you can be aware, Mr. Quaintance," she interrupted, "that I am the Duchesse des Rêves."

"Oh! cut that out," he cried harshly. "You're not fool enough, surely, to take that fellow's fairy tales on trust. Duchesse des Rêves! You're not the first by a long chalk who's tripped over that limed twig, and I wouldn't have twitted you with it either if you had said nothing about it. You were Miss Lorraine when you left the Rue des Trois Frères a few hours ago, and you're Miss Lorraine still. There's more than a ring needed to make you Duchesse des Rêves. I don't know why women are always so simple!"

She winced as though he had struck her, and bent her head as she heard the repute in which her husband was held.

"Listen, now," he went on more composedly, having settled that point to his own satisfaction. "There's no reason why you and I shouldn't pull together. Five millions will more than make up to you for the loss of a title you'd never have been allowed to wear, and—I'm not a bad sort of chap. Give me a fair trial and if I don't suit you I'll quit—honor bright. You can easily get a divorce, or I'll disappear and send you a death-certificate. You'll never see me again after you say go. I can't make you any fairer offer than that, now can I?"

It was very bitter to her to have to implement her plain statement, but his blind disbelief in it was so evident that, for her own sake, she must try to convince him that she spoke truth, that the dead man's millions were neither for him nor her. And she felt devoutly thankful then that she had taken the step she did to prevent such a contingency as that which now presented itself. Of two grave evils she had unwittingly chosen the lesser. Miles Quaintance's nephew, the man he had never seen and to whom he would yet have sold her, was worse in reality than she had ever imagined him.

"Hear me, please, Mr. Quaintance," she begged, her glance once more meeting his so steadily that his eyes dropped again in spite of himself, "and try to believe what I say. I have no desire to deceive you. I want you to understand why I married the Duc des Rêves."

He uttered an impatient ejaculation, but she continued quietly.

"It was only six months after my education was finished that I heard of Mr. Miles Quaintance's death. I was here, in Paris, then. He had bidden me remain until he could come over and take me back with him to San Francisco. With the news came his letter explaining that he had offered me to you in marriage. I don't know whether you can realize how I felt about that, but—I made up my mind at that moment that no power on earth would induce me to marry you. And, to make my resolution still safer, I married the Duc des Rêves.

"He was a poor cavalry officer then, and I did not know he would ever inherit a title. I was little more than a school-girl, and—I thought I cared for him. That seemed sufficient to me. I left the house in which I was living, ostensibly to sail for America but really to meet him. We were married immediately, and you will find record of that fact in the registers of the Arrondissement de l'Elysée and at the church of St. Yves-de-Suresne."

She started back, said no more, for Seager had sprung to his feet, was glaring at her with murderous malevolence. Arendsen had raised clenched hands, his white teeth showed between his black beard and moustache like those of a wild beast. Both men were stirred to a degree of passion incomprehensible to her. She did not know how utterly her simple words had dashed hopes on which they had been building so assuredly that these had come to assume the shape of certainties in their eyes.

"You did that—on purpose to—prevent me getting my share of the estate!" said Seager in a choked snarl, his fingers working. "You lined your own nest—and shut me outside to starve!"

"I did what self-respect dictated," she answered boldly, anger against his obvious baseness lending her courage.

"Curse self-respect of that sort!" he cried hotly. "You've robbed me of my birthright, that's what you've done. Ain't I a better man than the damned Duc des Rêves? You've cut your own throat, to spite me, that's what you've done. And you know it as well as I do."

He raved and raged, almost beside himself, till Arendsen, less noisy if no less dangerous, came forward and roughly silenced him. Fanchette's eyes turned longingly to the door, but he saw that and dragged the other toward it without loss of time. Seager was too bewildered to object, and presently the trembling women heard the key turned in the lock outside, the outer door was also made fast, and shuffling footsteps died away on the stair. They threw themselves down on the couch, and cried forlornly in each other's arms, so heavy had the strain upon their nerves been.

Seager and Arendsen fought their side of the question out by candle-light in one of the lower rooms. The latter was less downcast than his ally by the disclosures they had listened to, and whose sincerity neither of them could doubt. He had already a fresh move to counsel, did not despair entirely of late success. He was a more assiduous scoundrel than his companion.

"No, the game's not up yet, you fool!" he interrupted, after listening deafly for a time to Seager's futile imprecations.

"Shut your head, or talk sense. You'll have more cause to yelp after it *is* up and if you fail to make good. Don't forget who's staking you. Think less about yourself."

"What can we do now?" asked the other querulously. "The joker's played against us. We haven't a card left."

Arendsen tugged at his beard, and blinked at the candle, frowning. He was counting the chances that remained, and saw more than one.

"Why don't you think, instead of talking," he asked angrily. "I'll give you a start. What's to hinder us finding out whether this Duc of hers won't stand in with us. There are ten millions to go round, and most of those fellows would sell their souls for a third of that. We might upset the marriage, get him to disown it—there are half a dozen cards left to play if you'd only get busy and pick them out.

"Now what was she doing all by herself in America, eh? Had they separated already? There might be something in that!"

Seager stared at him, with the dawning of renewed hope in his eyes.

"Gad, you're great, Dirck," he said. "We'll go straight up and ask her. Then we'll tackle the Duc. If he'd only sit in with us, it would be easy money all round, and—come on. We'll go straight up and ask her."

When they knocked at the studio door again no answer was vouchsafed them, but they found their prisoners safe enough when they entered, and both on their feet, defiant.

"I'm sorry I spoke so—so sharply just now," Seager said addressing himself to the Duchesse, "and Mr. Arendsen has almost convinced me that you are really the Duchesse des Rêves. But what were you doing alone in America, so soon after your wedding, eh?"

He looked at her cunningly, as though that were a weak point in her story, and she fell into the trap, flushing painfully as she explained the reason which had led her to leave her husband within an hour of her marriage. She was hopeful that, once they were satisfied of the validity of her position, they would release her and give up whatever wild project they had entertained. But in that she was doomed to quick disappointment, for Seager informed her with much assumed sympathy that she must stay where she was until he should have absolute proof in support of her statements, alleging solicitude for her welfare as his moving impulse.

"I'll find out everything about this Duc des Rêves within twenty-four hours," he assured her, "and then, if all's well, you'll go back to him none the worse of knowing that he's treated you on the square—which is more than he's done in a good many cases. It's my plain duty to see you safe before I leave Paris, so you needn't thank me.

"Meantime you'll be quite comfortable here, and we shan't disturb you again till late to-morrow. Nothing more I can do for you? Good-night, then, and pleasant dreams."

"I turned that rather neatly, I think," he told Arendsen as they went back to their own quarters, "and, I'll tell you what, Dirck—I feel that I need a quencher. I'll run round to the Blue Rabbit for one, and be back before you can——"

"We'll go together," said Arendsen gruffly and knowing that it would be vain to object. "And we needn't come back here to-night. The sooner we strike the Duc's trail the better, and he's sure to be a night-bird."

They spent half an hour in the brasserie, and do what he would, he could not prevent Seager, whose spirits were once more rising with undue rapidity, from pushing through to the concert hall where he claimed acquaintance with two young men at one of the tables. At that moment also their useful friend Jules Chevrel looked in, and afflicted Arendsen for ten long minutes with specious reasons for his presence there at that hour. And then, when he at length got Seager quietly outside, that jovial blade insisted on returning to the studio forthwith, there to claim a kiss which, he alleged, his cousin had owed him since the occasion of his first meeting with her. It was with the greatest difficulty and at the exercise of all the patience on which he plumed himself that Arendsen finally got his fellow-ruffian to start with him on the trail of the Duc des Rêves.

CHAPTER XIX

THE STRANGE ENCOUNTER THAT TOOK PLACE IN THE BRASSERIE OF THE BLUE RABBIT

Within the grand reception room at the Elysée, in the midst of the brilliant throng gathered there, Quaintance stood swaying, with bent knees, like one on shipboard, as if he would presently collapse altogether.

"Hold up, old chap!" said O'Ferral anxiously. "Hold up! Don't lose your head, or you'll make a scene."

His warning proved efficaious where words more weighty might well have failed in their object. Quaintance had all a quiet man's horror of what is described as a scene, and, to escape such mischance, he braced his slack muscles, threw back his head, stood erect, gazing, half blind, across a sea of color, to where he could see dimly on its surface that fair face for which he had staked everything, and lost.

For that was what it had come to now. He had yielded entirely to a fond infatuation which had whispered that he must achieve success at all hazard, that he could not fail. He called to mind how he had once told the girl, on the sunkissed sands at Stormport, that he never failed, and had to choke back the groan which had almost escaped his lips. He had failed so abjectly in this most essential instance. He had strained every power to the uttermost, and with this result. He felt as though the main-spring of life had snapped within him.

But tragedy must wear the mask of mirth in modern society, and there was nothing to be gained by crying for the moon. His dream was shattered, and although in its downfall he was suffering hurt almost beyond endurance, he could still set his teeth, repress the outward signs of his great inward agony. His dainty duchess had recrossed his path, as he had prayed she might, but now there was a real duke with her! She was no more the blushing maid in whom his fondest hopes of happiness were centered, but a grave bride with an unsmiling groom beside her! It was time to write finis on that page and turn a fresh one, on which he would pen rapidly the story of a wasted life.

O'Ferral darted a swift, side-long glance at him, and was relieved to see that, but for an ashen greyness of the face which might pass presently, he had regained his self-control. The Duc des Rêves and his young wife were coming that way.

Congratulations were being showered upon them at every hand. And, even as Monsieur had foreseen, it was taken for granted that he had brought the American beauty over from her own country with him on his return to France. All Paris, from his point of view, had gathered in the spacious salons of the Elysée. His début as a married man could not well have been made under auspices more propitious. And, yet, through it all, both he and Madame la Duchesse were strangely quiet and constrained.

As they came slowly nearer to where Quaintance was standing stiffly against his pillar, some forceful influence drew the bride's sombre blue eyes past the men and women crowding about her to his. She started. A shiver shook her from head to foot and her pale cheeks flushed.

By what fatality had this man appeared a second time to see her do public penance for fault that was none of hers! And she had been hoping so earnestly that she might meet no known face when she first went forth with her husband!

Quaintance would fain have averted his glance, but he could not. She bowed to him since she must either do that or ignore him. He bent his head in acknowledgment, while Monsieur, who had noticed his wife's quick tremor, traced that to its apparent cause, regarded him under down-drawn eyebrows.

They came still nearer upon the tide, and Quaintance made no least move. The Duchesse passed close to him. She looked up into his haggard face, and her lips trembled a little, their corners drooped, at what she saw therein. But she spoke, in that warm, sweet voice of hers, a brave smile in her own eyes that were dark blue now, like the deeper sea which hides so many sad secrets.

"It was very good of you to pardon our escapade with your car," she said swiftly, but offering no explanation thereof since any such must have been at Fanchette's expense. "I am sorry you had so much trouble about the bracelet. You got my message?"

He bowed again, in assent, unable, strive as he might, to find words with which to reply fittingly. She moved away with her husband, and no more was said. She had not offered to introduce the one to the other, and Monsieur, knowing no English, was none too well pleased. He judged all men by his own old standards, and those had been low ones.

Others also had noticed the tall, distinguished-looking American who had evoked the first sign of interest in her surroundings shown by his lovely compatriot since she had entered the salon. He was looking lingeringly after his lost duchess as she passed onward out of his life.

"I'm going away now, O'Ferral," he repeated shakily. "You'll make my excuses to Madame Cornoyer. Tell her I'm seedy, or something. I'm going away."

"The very best thing you can do," commented O'Ferral, who had observed Monsieur looking back at his friend. "Avoid the fire, since you've burned your fingers, and, say, Steve, I wouldn't do anything silly if I were you."

"I'm a fool," said Quaintance drearily, "but not that sort, O'Ferral. And my name's Newman, not Steve."

They separated with a nod of understanding, but Quaintance had not yet made his escape when Cornoyer appeared escorting his mother with that bland air of extreme decorum for which he was justly famous. Quaintance chatted for a few moments with them, and then told Madame that he must go, alleging an insupportable headache.

"You don't look at all well," she said with quick sympathy, and her son's countenance became suddenly overcast.

"With your permission," said he plaintively, "I shall take this poor sick man to his apartment. Monsieur O'Ferral here, he will take great care of you till I return. O'Ferral, I go to the drug store of the Blue Rabbit there to buy antipyrin for Mister Newman. Conduct yourself judiciously with my mother."

He bowed with great formality, and, before Quaintance could protest against so much self-sacrifice, Madame had passed on with O'Ferral, Cornoyer was urging him toward a side door through which they made an inconspicuous exit.

"The Old Dutch will not stay here long," explained that youth with solemn complaisance. "She too is much bored by all this tomfoolishness. And then, perhaps, O'Ferral will come to the Blue Rabbit also, where they sell antipyrin frappé to cure sore heads."

Quaintance paid no heed to his chatter, and followed him almost without volition. It mattered little how he passed his time now, and he was glad of other company than the grey ghosts of his dead hopes. He had been dreading to go back alone, while these still mocked and mowed at his shoulders, to the empty rooms in the Rue St. Roch. He found himsef in a cab, which had carried him over the river and down the long Boulevard St. Germain, before he at length awoke with a start to the consciousness that he had come thither unwittingly.

"D'you know where the Duc des Rêves lives, J. J.?" he asked, unconcernedly as he could, and interrupting without ceremony the other's ceaseless flow of remarks.

"He lives in the Rue St. Honoré, that *chenapan.* But he has also a shack over here in the Faubourg. The hôtel des Rêves—it is there, see! That one. Hey! cabby. Hold on a minute."

Quaintance looked out at the massive mansion, and his heart was hot within him. It was there that his dear duchess of dreams would live out her life, amid splendor and luxury far beyond anything he could have offered her. The great wrought-iron gates which guarded the carriage entrance stood wide, and he could see into a spacious court-yard, aglow with the rich light of many lamps, a balustraded terrace about it from which rose tier upon tier of glistening windows. The place was a palace in miniature. He hoped that the duchess would be happy there.

"Des Rêves is blowing himself on gas!" Cornoyer observed in a puzzled tone. "I wonder what's up. He has not lived on this side of the river since his old man kicked the bucket."

"How long has he been married?" asked Quaintance abruptly.

"He isn't married."

"It must have been very lately then," Quaintance cogitated still more ruefully. "He's married, J. J., and to an American girl. The Duchesse des Rêves was with him at the Elysée to-night."

Cornoyer's face became instantly expressive of painfully astonished and, at the same time, sympathetic surprise. He was a perspicacious young man, and much that had been obscure in connection with Quaintance's recent erratic movements was clear to him now. A woman was at the bottom of it, as usual. And heartache was worse than headache.

It was all no business of his. He could not interfere. But—he had known the old duc and knew the young—he felt very sorry for the Duchesse: and for Quaintance.

A scarlet motor car entered the court-yard as they drove on again. Cornoyer looked after it curiously, but it held only the chauffeur. And silence obtained in the cab till it drew up before the Blue Rabbit.

"What on earth did you bring me here for?" asked Quaintance somewhat irritably, and stopped on the un-even sidewalk to study with growing distaste the shabby exterior of the brasserie, the gloomy-looking, unlighted fronts of the buildings which flanked it.

"To cure your headache," Cornoyer answered assuredly. "Come on in. If you don't like it we'll go away."

Quaintance buttoned up his overcoat, lest his evening clothes should make him unnecessarily conspicuous in such a plebeian resort, but Cornoyer took no such precaution. He pushed boldly past the curtained doors which led from the empty brasserie into a much more roomy chamber beyond, confronted without embarrassment the festive assemblage gathered about the marble-topped tables there and which broke into uproarious acclamation as they appeared.

"Do not take any notice of them," he advised, his own features of a ferocious gravity, and led the way to an unoccupied table half way down the long, dimly lighted hall, where they were immediately provided with two foot-high steins of Münchener, and having quaffed these, standing, to the health of the other revellers, were forthwith free of the guild and to follow their own devices.

Quaintance had never been in the Brasserie of the Blue Rabbit before, although he had known the Latin Quarter intimately in his student days, and it stood within half a mile of the School of Mines. But he recollected that they had reached it through various frowsy lanes, that it stood well apart from the beaten track.

"What street's this?" he asked Cornoyer.

"This is not a street," answered that solemn-visaged young man. "It is the Impasse de Paradis, where we have come to hear some angels singing."

The atmosphere of the Blue Rabbit seemed more appropriate to fiends than angels, so smoke-thick was it. The unceiled oaken rafters were wreathed in a heavy cloud, and the robes of those angels already present would certainly reek of tobacco upon the morrow. Some of them wore robes, too, which it would cost a large sum to replace, and which became them marvellously.

From enshadowed alcoves shone clear, bright eyes, and pearly teeth flashed smiles as Quaintance looked dully about him. The swish and the frou-frou of silk and satin were audible over the rippling tumult of voices, the lace and the lingerie liberally displayed on all sides were of the most luxurious. Here was no cheap café-concert of the Quartier, but a sudden resort of the smart set in search of a new sensation and thrilled with the perilous pleasures of outvieing even the *dames du trottoir* in the exposure of their more intimate charms.

Most of the men were also in evening dress, and as much at their ease as the waiters shuffling about in dirty shirt-sleeves with steins by the dozen.

It was the correct thing to drink only beer at the Brasserie of the Blue Rabbit. And, that no least touch of realism might be lacking in their make-believe, the proffer and acceptance of a stein was introduction sufficient to any one of its frequenters. No names need ever be mentioned, and all acquaintance was understood to cease at the outward threshold.

So much Quaintance gleaned from Cornoyer in answer to his idle questions before midnight chimed musically from the near belfry of Notre Dame. And, as the bells ceased, an answering carillon was struck upon the concert grand at one end of the long room, the talk and laughter died down, the entertainment provided for the expectant patrons of the Blue Rabbit began.

It proved far better than Quaintance had anticipated. For among the idle rich who formed the bulk of the gathering there were those who had great gifts which they squandered thus. A woman sang, most divinely. A young girl danced, unashamed, till the seventh of the Seven Veils had slipped from her slender body. A man with a weary, cynical face, made such music on a violin that, after he sat down again, there was no sound to be heard save the tick of the clock outside in the Brasserie. And time passed unheeded.

Another rose, a tall, lissom slip of a girl, all in white, and crossed, laughing, to the piano. Quaintance sat back and closed his eyes as her velvet contralto called up a vision which he would fain have forgotten for that brief interval, the words that she voiced so sweetly brought an added ache to his heart, a hurtful echo of his own dear-bought experience.

> "Plaisir d'amour ne dure u'un moment:
> Chagrin d'amour dure toute la vie . . ."

He would fain have forgotten, but——

He was recalled to a perfunctory interest in his surroundings by the prolonged applause bestowed on the singer, through which there came to his ears a strange yet familiar voice loudly raised in greeting, and he saw a hand fall heavily on Cornoyer's shoulder.

"Hello, J. J.! Still seeing life, eh? Quite like old times to run across *you* here. Make room for me—I'm going to buy you boys drinks. Hey, garçon? A quart of Heidsieck and three big glasses. Three, yes, three, *dummkopf!*"

Cornoyer shook hands, rather limply and since he could not very well help himself, with this boisterous newcomer, in whom Quaintance recognized his own namesake, the man he had first seen in Cornoyer's company at the Cornucopia Club in New York. He was dressed for motoring, and looked more prosperous now than he had at that date, an appearance he implemented unnecessarily by producing a bundle of bills, of which he made a great display.

"Who's your friend, J. J.?" he demanded, but Cornoyer was conveniently deaf, and shook his head when the waiter brought the champagne round to him.

"Oh, come on, fill up!" the other insisted. "Just this one round. I've some one waiting for me in all sorts of a hurry. And maybe you won't have another chance, for I'm going to get married, J. J., my boy! You never saw such a peach of a girl as I've got on a string upstairs, and—we'll both be rolling in money. See this wad? Want half of it? Say the word and it's yours! Lots more where that came from."

Quaintance saw that he was not as sober as he might have been, and paid no attention to what he said further. He was in the midst of some huskily confidential communication to Cornoyer when an irascible-looking man with a big black beard and moustache bore down on him from the doorway, reproached him hotly for wasting his time thus. He rose, sulkily querulous but obedient, once more shook hands, and departed unsteadily in the wake of his masterful companion.

Cornoyer scowled at his back as he went.

"I wish they had kept that fellow in jail in New York," he muttered. "Let us go home now, Newman. Another night we can come back here and see some more high-lifers playing the fool."

They passed through the deserted brasserie, and stepping into the alley, Quaintance looked right and left to see how the land lay. Standing there while Cornoyer went back to buy cigarettes, he caught sight of two dim figures at the blind end of the Impasse, recognized in them his unworthy namesake and that individual's black-bearded friend. They seemed to be engaged in angry argument, and the latter once more gained his point. They turned away from the low door at which they were standing, passed rapidly, without noticing him in the shadow, and turned the corner into a cross-street. Quaintance lit a cigar expeditiously, and started with Cornoyer to find a cab.

"How is the sorehead now?" asked that astute gentleman as they drove across the silent Isle de la Cité. "I saw a duchess at the Blue Rabbit, but not the Duchesse des Rêves. There are plenty of peaches in Paris, Newman, and even that first-water cad of a Quaintance has found one to marry him—the same girl he made to kiss him before he would mend her automobile."

"Who?" asked Quaintance stupidly.

"The one that he told us about at the club in New York—when you and O'Ferral were so cross with me."

Quaintance stared at him through the darkness, unable to understand.

"But how the devil can he marry her if she's the Duchesse des Rêves already?" he demanded explosively, forgetting in his own bewilderment that Cornoyer knew nothing of her.

"I bought the Duchesse's car from her before she left the other side," he explained rapidly, "and that's how I came to know that it was he who held her up in it. But she didn't kiss him."

"Of course not," Cornoyer remarked cheerfully. "I did not believe him. He's always too soused to know what he says. Forget him."

"Tell me all you know about him, J. J.," Quaintance begged, his mind full of dark and deadly suspicions. "Who is he? Where does he hail from? What did he tell you to-night?"

"His name is Quaintance," Cornoyer replied readily, "Stephen Quaintance. He told me when I first met him he had just come from Africa to New York to marry his cousin because she was a millionairess. He told me a lot of hot air too about his travels—where he could get a lot of rose-diamonds whenever he wanted to, and so on. To-night he said he had found her and she was a peach—the same one he told us about at the club. And so he is going to marry her.

"But how is he going to do that, if Des Rêves has married her first, eh?

"He's a damned imposter!" cried Quaintance, his mind made up on that one point at least, and quite unable to contain himself. Cornoyer looked at him in surprise, so strained and tense was his tone.

"He's a damned impostor! He's impersonating another man. I must do something to stop it.

"I knew Stephen Quaintance," he went on excitedly, "and that scoundrel's trying to pass for him. If you see him again, Cornoyer, find out where he lives and let me know without a moment's delay. It's a matter of the most urgent importance to me. I'll tell you the rest of the trouble some other time. Here's the Rue St. Roch. I won't ask you in—I must talk it all over with O'Ferral first, and——"

He shook hands hastily, jumped out as the cab stopped at his door.

"You won't forget, J. J.," he urged anxiously. "It will be the very greatest favor that you can do me to let me know where I can lay hands on that fellow."

He ran upstairs, his mind in a frenzy. Could it be possible that Miles Quaintance's adopted daughter was now the Duchesse des Rêves! That were surely too cruel an irony of blind fate, and yet—judging by all he knew, it seemed but too probable.

He clattered into O'Ferral's rooms in an agony of belated enlightenment. But they were empty. He found on his own parlor table a note from his friend which said, "Have been called away. Don't know when I may get back."

CHAPTER XX

THE PRODIGAL GOES BACK TO HIS HUSKS—AT THE BRISTOL

"May I telephone in the morning to inquire how you are?" the Duc des Rêves asked wistfully of his wife as he bade her good-night in the corridor of the Elysée opposite the ladies' boudoir. There he met her when she had arrived at the palace, and she had forbidden him to see her further on her departure, not caring to afford him opportunity for any less public leave-taking.

"Yes, if you wish to do so," she answered without much interest, and, having bowed to him, went her way.

He watched the straight, slender figure disappear down the broad passage, the pale silk cloak she wore outlined against the crimson carpet between two thickets of green plants overtopped by tall palms. And then he turned reluctantly back to the salon, to spend another half hour there as he had promised her that he would. It hurt him that she should deem necessary such precaution against his following her, and yet he could not blame her. He would prove to her presently that she might henceforth trust him even as he was ready to trust her.

He had been greatly gratified by the reception they had met at the hands of society, knowing how little he himself had done to earn any but the most frigid tolerance. Their first evening together had been a great success to all outward seeming, and beyond that he need not yet aspire. In time he would show his world that even such a prodigal as he had been might make a model husband, and at the moment he must baffle its curiosity as to the wife for whose sweet sake he had undertaken that radical change. He stayed for a full half-hour, meeting inquiries and congratulations alike with a bland courtesy which irritated his former intimates to a degree.

When he reached his rooms in the Rue St. Honoré, Jules Chevrel was absent and that annoyed him. A sudden distaste of the over-luxurious atmosphere there overcame him. It was too reminiscent of much that he would fain have forgotten. He resolved, in his new-found ambition, to give them up, and also to rid himself of Chevrel at the first opportunity. The fellow knew far too much about him, had of late grown very insolent in his knowledge. And, rather than incur delay in his own reformation, he would remove from that place of evil memories on the instant. He found a suit-case, was packing it with his own hands, when Jules came sauntering in from the garage where he had been cleaning the car which Seager had just redelivered.

Jules looked contemptuously at his employer's preparations. He had anticipated some stupidity of the sort, so changed had Monsieur shown himself since his brief visit to the Rue des Trois Frères. He had further foreseen that it would not suit him to stay in Monsieur's service, and when his first impertinent remark earned him immediate dismissal he merely smiled with supercilious indifference.

"It is to be supposed that Monsieur does not mean to turn me into the street at this hour?" said he.

"You may remain until I remove the furniture," the Duc replied briefly, and set out, carrying his own suitcase, servantless, to an hotel. Jules still smiled sardonically.

"He has the swelled head with this new wife of his!" said that observer of events. "Well, we shall see what happens. I have my thirty thousand francs, and—it would be interesting to catch another glimpse of Madame's wealthy friends. They may be more communicative since their expensive interview. I'll take a cab to the Blue Rabbit on the chance of running across them there."

The Duc slept badly in unaccustomed quarters, and missed Jules' ministrations in the morning, as Jules had known he would. But he refrained from calling for his former servant, as he was much inclined to do, and spent the forenoon in aimless anticipation of the time when he might telephone the hôtel des Rêves. That came at last and he rang up, asking that Madame la Duchesse might speak with him. When he was told that she had not returned since leaving the hôtel the night before, his heart almost stopped beating.

He called up the head of the household, and had swift perquisition made into all that had happened since she had first arrived there from the Rue des Trois Frères. He was told that her maid had gone to the Elysée for her, in his own motor because one of the only carriage-pair had fallen suddenly sick and was now dead, but neither mistress nor maid had from that moment been heard of. He cut the hôtel des Réves off, and called up his garage. The chauffeur knew nothing. He had been off duty, by Monsieur's permission, on the previous evening. The car in question had certainly not been used. It was clean now as he had left it. Monsieur called up the Elysée, and begged speech with the groom of the gateway there. The groom of the gateway remembered distinctly that Madame la Duchesse had driven off in a scarlet auto instead of the carriage and pair expected. No, he had not noticed the chauffeur particularly. Then the Duc called up the Palais de Justice and asked for Tissot-Latour. But, before that delighted official had even got to the 'phone, he changed his mind as to the advisability of confiding in the Quai des Orfèvres and merely invited him to call at the Rue St. Honoré as soon as he could spare time that afternoon. M. Tissot-Latour thought he might leave his desk soon after four, and was cut off in the midst of a long harangue. And, lastly, the white-lipped man who had stayed so long in the asphyxiating sound—and air-proof booth at the hotel bureau called up his own apartment, whence he was answered by Jules Chevrel, who made no comment when he was informed that he was reinstated in employment, and bidden to come round to the hotel without delay. As he strolled toward the Bristol at his leisure, he muttered to himself, "Something has happened between them. And so soon! I wonder what?"

He found Monsieur in a state bordering on distraction, and started in unfeigned astonishment when he was told the reason.

"Madame has left me, Jules," said the Duc in a hoarse whisper which was the best voice he could muster. "She did not return to the hôtel des Rêves from the Elysée. You must help me to find her again."

Jules Chevrel's face darkened. So this was why those Americans had been so liberal! And he who had acted as chauffeur, the tall, fair man who called himself Stephen Quaintance, had told him that Madame had been safely delivered at her destination. They had misled him, had tricked him, and—— A dazzling inspiration entered his mind. He almost chuckled to think how fortune's wheel had revolved since the day on which that other American beast had thrown him into the sea at Rockaway Beach. It seemed that he might now revenge himself condignly for that still rankling insult. For it was none other than his aggressor whom he had observed overnight in the concert-hall of the Blue Rabbit at the same table with the chauffeur, Stephen Quaintance. He would teach all those perfidious foreigners that they could not make a fool of a Frenchman and go scot-free. But he must be wary lest Monsieur should learn the part he himself had played with regard to the car.

He expressed most respectful sympathy with his employer over such an altogether unlooked for misfortune.

"It is but right to assume," he went on, "that Madame la Duchesse has not disappeared of her own free will. Has Monsieur noticed any acquaintance of hers in her neighborhood?"

Monsieur was on his feet in an instant, striding to and fro in the spacious bedroom. He had indeed noticed what the perspicacious Jules had suggested, and that no later than last night at the Elysée. He told the cunning valet some part of what he had observed there, and that rascal was inwardly transported although he had listened with great outward gravity.

"It may be then that I can offer Monsieur a clue," he declared. "The gentleman Monsieur describes was seen with Madame in America. I caught a glimpse of him yesterday at Auteuil. Late last night I saw him in company with two others at a café, and one of the others wore motor clothing, a complete chauffeur's outfit. It almost looks as though they had abducted Madame!"

The Duc gnashed his teeth in a passion of impotent anger. He had not told Jules of Madame's quick emotion at sight of her countryman, how she had greeted him, or that the stalwart American had left the palace immediately after. A most poisonous suspicion was penetrating his mind. He had just remembered that she had insisted upon leaving by herself, forbidden him to see her to her carriage. And at that instant all his good resolutions deserted him. He could see clearly then how he had been tricked by the one woman he had ever trusted.

"Get me a pint of champagne, quickly, Jules," he commanded, "and a glass of cognac to go with it."

As Jules left the room, he threw himself down on the bed, covered his face with two twitching hands.

What a fool he had been, to believe that women were any better than men! And she had taken him in so easily! All she wanted, of course, was to free herself of police surveillance, so that she might go back to the man who had followed her from America. What was he to do now? Put the matter into the hands of the police, and so incur public exposure? No, that would not do. It would not help him to have her brought back a prisoner. Did he want her back at all, since she had thus cruelly killed his nascent faith in her flawlessness? He did not know.

He hastily swallowed the heady liquor Jules brought him, curtly bade that still respectfully sympathetic schemer remove his belongings back to the Rue St. Honoré, and left the room, almost too sorely stricken to think, not caring whither he went, but with murder for latent motive. And, as he walked, with bent head, down the vestibule of the hotel on his way out into the sunshine, Quaintance came up the steps toward him, arm in arm with Cornoyer and in a mood no less reckless.

At sight of him the Duc stopped abruptly, and drew a long, hissing breath. Here was opportunity all unlooked for! He must make the most of it. And Quaintance was eyeing him in no friendly fashion, although Cornoyer, who knew the Duc, had nodded a salutation and would have passed on.

He intercepted the pair by stepping squarely in front of Quaintance. He had recovered his wits now, in so far as outward conduct was concerned, and knew exactly what he must do.

"The pleasure of a word with Monsieur," he begged, having lifted his hat with great ceremony.

Quaintance waited, impassive, while Cornoyer reluctantly drew to one side and the passers by glanced curiously at the two facing each other so stiffly there.

"Where is Madame, my wife?" demanded the Duc, in the same steely and monotonous voice, his chin thrust forward, a fire of hate alight in his narrowed eyes.

"How the devil do I know where Madame your wife is!" retorted Quaintance, thankful for the excuse to pick quarrel with the roué who had robbed him of his heart's desire.

The Duc struck him, lightly enough, across the face, but the voice in which he branded him, "Liar!" rang through the vestibule. It had scarce left his lips when Quaintance returned the blow, but in such wise that his enemy went hurtling against a bystander who had halted in blank amazement, and they both came to earth with a crash.

Cornoyer sprang forward. Hotel employés clustered about the fallen. The vestibule of the severely decorous Bristol evolved a crowd almost as quickly as would have any plebeian tavern in Paris. And in the heart of it stood Quaintance, with clenched fists, wishing he could have got in another blow. Cornoyer had stepped to his elbow, and they remained thus until the Duc had rid himself of the irate bystander.

Then Cornoyer went forward, leaving Quaintance strictly charged to restrain himself, to where the victim of his friend's right arm was quietly stanching a cut chin and striving to convince those who encircled him that he had no further immediate violent intention. He willingly accompanied Cornoyer in the direction of the door, while Quaintance sauntered toward the smoking-room whither they had been bound. The onlookers seeing them separate thus drifted about their business discontentedly.

Jules Chevrel, following his employer at a respectful distance, had overseen the encounter from the safe shelter of a convenient alcove, and he stayed quietly there till Quaintance had passed out of sight, when he escaped, suit-case in hand and muttering. With what a butcherly blow had the American savage felled Monsieur! Jules trusted that the matter would not be allowed to rest there.

And neither was it. When Cornoyer came back he wore a look of genuine gravity for the first time since Quaintance had met him, and also spoke in French.

"M. le Duc demands satisfaction," he said. "I told him that you would be quite ready to accord it. May I act for you in the matter?"

"I hate to drag you in, J. J.," Quaintance told him, "but—if you don't mind—— O'Ferral's away, you see, and——"

"I'm only too glad to have been on hand. What weapons do you prefer?"

"I prefer my fists," said Quaintance with good-humored nonchalance. He was on much better terms with the world now than he had been. "But I don't suppose that would suit the other side, so I'll leave it to you, J. J."

"The Duc's a most expert swordsman," Cornoyer stated reflectively. "He'd run you through in a twinkling, unless you're a first-class fencer."

"Then we'll strike swords out, old chap. I've played at singlesticks, but not very seriously."

"He's a dead shot, too," said Cornoyer.

"He'll be a dead shot when I've done with him," Quaintance asserted grimly. "Better make it guns of some kind, J. J. That will probably be genteel enough to suit him, and I've learned to be handy with most sorts."

"I gave him your address, and he'll send a friend round between four and five. So I'll be back there with you then, and we'll fix it for to-morrow at dawn if that suits you."

"Perfectly. The sooner we get it over the better. And say, J. J., I'd better—I don't want to get you into trouble."

"That is the last thing you must think about," Cornoyer replied steadily.

When M. le Duc reached his rooms in the Rue St. Honoré, a short walk from the Place Vendôme, with his handkerchief to his chin which he had had repaired at a drug-store in passing, he found Tissot-Latour in the act of pushing the bell-button. He had been at a loss to know where to turn for a friend who would not infer too much from the fact that he meant to fight the American to whom all Paris at the Elysée had seen his unsmiling Duchesse both smile and speak. Tissot-Latour had not been present at the function there. Furthermore, this fat vulgarian whom he esteemed so lightly was of sufficient standing in the Préfecture de Police to ensure any friend of his at least a fair chance of escape in case of any such unpleasant complication as would indubitably result from the projected encounter.

He therefore greeted his unsuspecting sycophant warmly, apologized for the oversight which had occurred in connection with the card for the presidential reception, supplied him with gin-and-vermouth, a mixture he much affected, and broached the subject without delay.

Tissot-Latour was too grateful for his kindness to run any risk of curdling it by acceding to his request otherwise than freely. It startled him greatly at first, and his flabby cheeks paled at the mere idea of firearms or almost equally dangerous steel, but, as he rapidly reflected, duelling was quite a fashionable amusement, seldom resulted in bloodshed beyond a teaspoonful, and it would add enormously to his social prestige to have represented a duke on the field of honor.

"But certainly, dear Etienne," he said affectionately, sucking at the cigar his host had tossed him. "Where shall I find this fellow? Rue St. Roch—name of Cornoyer. Any relation to old Cornoyer, formerly of the Foreign Affairs? His son! I shall be glad indeed to act for you."

"Try to arrange for pistols," the Duc suggested, "and you'd better cut round there now. It doesn't do to be late in such affairs."

"I fly," Tissot-Latour assured him, struggling out of his arm-chair with an effort.

"Not a word to a soul on the subject," his principal warned him sternly, and he looked downcast. He had counted on some preliminary credit in the circles he frequented, would even have risked official displeasure by letting the newspapers know in advance of his aristocratic engagement.

"If anything's heard about it I'll hold you responsible, the Duc continued menacingly. "You'll have plenty of notoriety after it's over."

"Me, I seek not notoriety," his disappointed second assured him, "nor would I even appear in such an affair for any one but you, Etienne."

He panted round to the Rue St. Roch in the afternoon sunshine, and the concierge there ushered him into the room in which Cornoyer was awaiting him. It did not take Cornoyer long to find out what sort of fellow he had to deal with, and thereafter all went smoothly, since Tissot-Latour contented himself with agreeing profusely to such arrangements as the other cared to put forward. It was thus settled that the meeting should take place next morning, as soon after dawn as there should be light to shoot by, since the weapons were to be pistols, at twenty paces. The place, Verrières.

Tissot-Latour was charmed with his colleague's civility, and lingered with some idea of ingratiating himself with him for future effect, but Cornoyer having got through with the business in hand became suddenly uncommunicative, and the aspirant to his friendship was on the point of departure when O'Ferral walked in upon them.

CHAPTER XXI

THE POSTERN IN THE IMPASSE DE PARADIS

Quaintance had spent some agonizing hours since he had reached the Rue St. Roch at half-past four in the morning and found that O'Ferral was absent. He had been counting on the correspondent for sympathy and counsel in the most heart-breaking predicament which had evolved itself out of his well meant effort to protect Miles Quaintance's adopted daughter from the cruel measures his uncle had devised against her and himself. He would have given his right hand now to revoke the past, since he could not doubt that his scheme had signally miscarried, had recoiled on his own head.

Neither did he doubt now that the man whom he had first encountered at the Cornucopia, and last, less than an hour ago, at the Blue Rabbit, had somehow managed to possess himself of the identity of that dead Stephen Quaintance who should have been safe in his grave at Yola on the Benue in Africa. And had tracked the girl down with the idea of inducing her to comply with the terms of the will. But that unscrupulous adventurer had also come too late, since she was wed already.

That was what hurt beyond all else. The thought that his blind sacrifice had cost him his fair chance of winning the only woman in the world who could now comfort him, her of the pure pale face, the sorrowful blue eyes, the duchess of his dearest dreams whom he had seen his last of as she passed out of his life on a duke's arm. He groaned aloud in the extremity of his regret.

Ah! could he but have known in time. He had meant well, but fate, with which he would have interfered, had struck back at him viciously, a cowardly blow, from behind, in the dark.

He sat down in his own rooms to wait up in case the correspondent should come in. He was still sitting there, a cold pipe between his teeth, staring fixedly at the dead fire on the hearth, when a servant came in with coffee at nine o'clock. When Cornoyer called at noon to carry him off to breakfast, he found him in the same attitude, and O'Ferral had not yet returned.

At sight of Cornoyer, however, he pulled himself together, drank the stale coffee at his elbow, and made a hasty toilet. A cold bath braced his system, and, by the time they had walked as far as the Rue de la Chaussée d'Antin, where they turned into the Paillard, he was once more able to think clearly. And the trend of his thoughts was toward revenge, against the man who had, however unwittingly, come between him and his one hope of happiness. The other, that vulgar scoundrel who was impersonating him, might be brought to book afterwards, since no great harm could meantime result from his machinations.

Over the breakfast-table he took Cornoyer into his late confidence, telling him briefly the strange story of Stephen Quaintance, his uncle's will, and the girl who was now the Duchesse des Rêves. And Cornoyer heard him out in astonished silence, had no comment to make when he finished. The situation in which he found himself was so unenviable, and there seemed to be no way out of it.

Cornoyer told him, somewhat reluctantly and in reply to his pointed questions, that the Duc des Rêves' record was almost as bad as his reputation. He wondered bitterly how long it would take the Duchesse to find out her husband's character, and let his grudge against the Duc grow, unchecked.

From the restaurant Cornoyer took him to call for a friend at the Bristol and he went, almost without volition, rather than be left alone with his thoughts again. The outcome of their meeting with the chief cause of his mental anguish filled him with an unholy joy. He hurried Cornoyer back to the Rue St. Roch as soon as he decently could, and set him down in O'Ferral's apartment to wait the coming of M. le Duc's representative in the matter to be arranged.

The correspondent expressed no surprise at finding his premises thus occupied in his absence, but nodded a greeting to the young Frenchman and turned into Quaintance's sitting room. He was still wearing the evening clothes and light overcoat in which he had parted from Madame Cornoyer at the palace entrance, was, as always, neat, unruffled, and inconspicuous. Quaintance jumped from his seat as he entered, Cornoyer, who had at last got rid of Tissot-Latour, close at his heels.

"Confound you, O'Ferral!" he cried crossly. "Where have you been? I sat up all night expecting you."

Cornoyer winked warningly from behind, but O'Ferral needed no hint as to his friend's unfortunate frame of mind.

"Been to Havre," he rejoined pleasantly, and, having helped himself to a drink and a cigar, sat down. "Caught the 12.45 there, and have just got back. Had a hurry call at the last moment to say that I was to go. Only time to send you a line, and—here I am. What's doing?"

Cornoyer came forward and "Well?" asked Quaintance.

"To-morrow, at dawn," said he, "behind a cottage at the edge of the Bois de Verrières. Pistols, at twenty paces. Two shots."

"One will be sufficient," commented Quaintance, "but you were quite right to agree to a second, J. J."

O'Ferral looked grave.

"J. J.," he remarked, seeking no superfluous explanations, "I want you to do me a favor."

"Consider it done," replied the other without hesitation.

"I want you to let me take your place to-morrow at dawn."

"Now, see here," the correspondent continued in deference to Cornoyer's disappointment. "I introduced you to Newman, and you must let me take a hand in this trouble. "I'm better situated than you for any affair of the sort, because I have no family. If I had, I'd stand out, as you're going to do—to oblige me."

"All right," agreed Cornoyer with an obvious effort. "If Newman—Quaintance doesn't object, have it your own way."

"I think O'Ferral's right, J. J.," said Quaintance. "I really hate to involve either of you in such a business, but, since I can't help myself, I'll have the one with the fewest ties. I'm in your debt already for all that you've done, and no one could have made neater arrangements. You won't be sorry this time to-morrow that you're well out of it."

Cornoyer still looked glum, but no more was said on that subject and O'Ferral turned to Quaintance with a quick inquiry.

"You've told J. J. who you were," he exclaimed. "What's been happening?"

"All my plans have miscarried most damnably," Quaintance explained. "The dead man on whom I bestowed my identity does not seem to have supported it long. There's a spurious Stephen Quaintance turned up, in the person of that very fellow J. J. had with him at the Cornucopia. We met him again last night, but he'd gone before I found out what his game was. He must have robbed the body of all my papers, and thought that by posing as me he might make his fortune.

"But he's just too late. Miles Quaintance's adopted daughter is married already. She is the Duchesse des Rêves."

He was speaking in a slow, impersonal tone, but his listeners could hear through that the hurt he was suffering.

"The Duc des Rêves gave me to understand a couple of hours ago that his wife had disappeared, and called me a liar because I stated that I did not know where she was. I had never spoken to the man before. To-morrow at dawn he and I are going to settle accounts, on that score and others."

O'Ferral was regarding him with a deep frown.

"The Duchesse has disappeared!" he said. "Now that's strange—very strange. I saw the Duchesse leave the Elysée last night. I was seeing Madame Cornoyer into her carriage, and we had to wait for a few seconds while the Duchesse stepped into her car. It was the Duc's car she drove off in, I know, but the chauffeur was that same fellow you had at the Cornucopia, J. J., and who, it seems, is now posing as Stephen Quaintance. I recognized him with some difficulty, but I'll swear that it was he. And perhaps he could tell the Duc des Rêves something as to the Duchesse's whereabouts.

"When does the twelvemonth term of the will expire, Steve?"

Quaintance was on his feet.

"What date's this?" he muttered. "The sixteenth. It must be to-night. Yes, that's right. I kept a careful note in my memory. Time's up at midnight.

"Damnation! What a fool I was. He must have kidnapped her. I wasn't bothering much about him—I thought he was too late to do any harm. I must get after him at once. I saw him and that scoundrel with the black beard at a door in the Impasse de Paradis. I'll try that first. I'll shoot him like a dog if——"

He hurried into his bed-room, muttering threats, and came back charging a revolver.

"Put that thing down," said O'Ferral in his sternest voice, his back against the door whither he had sprung in quick precaution.

"Listen to me, Steve, or I'll lock you in here till you learn sense. Where's this Impasse de Paradis? Explain the thing coherently and we'll sort it all out by degrees. Your methods will only make it worse."

Quaintance looked at him with a puzzled scowl, but that soon cleared before the correspondent's steady eyes, and he related the circumstance of which the others were still in ignorance.

"Well and good," said O'Ferral judiciously. "Now sit down for two minutes while I change my clothes, and then we'll take a casual squint at the Impasse de Paradis. Understand plainly that you and I are taking the thing up together at this stage, and don't let me hear you move hand or foot till I come back for you."

His masterful tone did not fail of effect on his friend's fevered mind.

"You're very good, O'Ferral," Quaintance said much more calmly. "Excuse me. I must be a bit on edge, I think."

He pocketed his weapon and sat down, gripping the elbow-rests of his chair so that great dents showed in the leather. It was the worst that had befallen yet to think that actual harm might have come to his lost duchess through him.

O'Ferral reappeared without undue delay, and to him as commander of the expedition Cornoyer addressed a modest request that he might be permitted to join it.

"I don't want to butt in," said he, "but I might be useful if there were a row."

"Glad to have you with us," replied O'Ferral. "Come on. We'll get a cab by the way."

It had been dark for nearly an hour before they set out, and, when they reached the street, it was raining. They drove to the Place St. Michel, and from there made their way on foot to the Impasse.

"Cut into the Blue Rabbit and ask the proprietor if he's seen anything lately of an American called Stephen Quaintance," the correspondent commanded of Cornoyer, who had been telling him of their encounter with that impostor there. "You know the old fellow well enough to find out anything he can tell."

But Cornoyer came back almost immediately shaking his head.

"He hasn't been in since we left this morning," he reported. "A week ago he used to be about a good deal, and ran up a score which he settled yesterday evening."

They went on down the Impasse, and Quaintance pointed out the postern in an angle of the blank wall at its blind end. O'Ferral looked back, but there was no one visible. He pulled a little electric torch from his pocket and scrutinized the key-hole carefully.

"Someone been out and in quite lately," he said. "We'll have a look at the front of this building."

They traveled round to the lane on which it abutted, empty at that hour and gloomy on a wet night with nothing in view but the grim frontage of the lofty old dwelling-house, standing with shuttered windows, the last of its kind on that site. A weatherbeaten board lacking most of its pristine whiteness announced that it was to let, furnished, for a term of years, and that the keys might be had from the bakery at an adjacent corner.

"Get the keys," O'Ferral ordered, and Cornoyer was off on the instant. He was intensely interested in the proceedings, and filled with admiration for their leader's detective methods. The correspondent recalled him.

"Got a gun?" that gentleman asked.

"Well, you'd better make a bee-line for the nearest armory and lay in a working six-shooter at the same time. We shan't require to use it, of course, but it might have a good moral effect."

Cornoyer came hurrying back, with the news that the keys had been granted no later than that forenoon to a man who answered in every respect to his description of the soi-disant Stephen Quaintance. They would probably not be returned for three or four days, since that individual had required them for that length of time with a view to taking some measurements.

"H'm!" said O'Ferral. "Steve, I think we've struck the scent first throw-off. But we'll have to break in, unless you'd prefer to do things legally, which would take longer."

"Don't lose a moment," Quaintance whispered. "If she's in that villain's hands, O'Ferral, her life's not safe for the next few hours."

"True for you," assented the correspondent under his breath. It had not struck him before that the situation was such a grave one. Much might happen in a few hours where there were ten millions at stake.

"We'll try the back first," he directed. "Come on round again."

Cornoyer was deeply delighted when he produced from his pocket a bunch of thin keys, with one of which he almost succeeded in forcing the lock. But he finally had to admit himself baffled, and drew back a little to stare vexedly up at the high blank wall.

"One of us could get over that, I think," Cornoyer suggested.

"I'm lightest. I'll try if Newman—Quaintance will give me a back."

"You'll have to look sharp about it then," O'Ferral advised. "If we're caught in the act it will mean the lock-up for the lot of us. We haven't even the shadow of an excuse, unless you want to give the whole show away, Steve."

"We'll try it and see what happens," said Quaintance. "Wait, here's someone coming!"

They flattened themselves, faces inward, among the shadows, but the footsteps they heard turned into the brasserie at the far corner. No further sound was audible.

Quaintance braced himself at his full height against the wall. Cornoyer clambered on to his shoulders and straightened himself on firm footing.

"*Allez! Vite!* he whispered, jumping swiftly and surely. Quaintance had set his teeth while the boots hit into his shoulders as the other made his spring, but uttered no sound.

"Where is he?" he asked stepping back to look up.

"He's over the wall," answered O'Ferral. "You did that stunt very neatly, Steve."

An instant of expectation followed, and they heard a dull, grating wrench. Then silence for two or three minutes which seemed interminable till that was broken by a quick creak and a heavy body fell from above at the back of the door. The door opened, noiselessly, which proved that the hinges had recently been oiled, and they pushed hastily in as a couple of pedestrians came round the corner toward them. O'Ferral closed it behind him, and they waited with beating hearts, but those steps also ceased suddenly.

"How did you get in?" he asked Cornoyer, casting the light of his lamp cautiously about him.

"There is a small skylight above. It's bolted inside but I dug the glass out of its frame. I set it back in place as well as I could before I let go."

"Looks all right from here," said O'Ferral in a whisper and took his thumb from the battery button. "Boots off now, boys. We must tread delicately. Take open order, and don't tumble over each other."

As soon as they were thus prepared against accident, they set off, the correspondent leading the way, which took them through the covered passage into the kitchen.

The door from there to the hall-way was closed, and it creaked as they opened it. They stood listening intently in the pitch darkness, until they were fairly sure that no one had heard, before moving on. It was eerie work, and each felt glad that the others were there.

The rooms opening off the hallway were empty of all save faded furniture, ghastly of shape in its ragged coverings, but showing no trace of having been touched for years. They crept upstairs, and, on the floor above, found a locked door which they could not open. O'Ferral motioned to them to pass on in the meantime, and mounted another flight, where there were once more only empty rooms. A third and fourth afforded no more encouragement, and the lamp's faint gleam showed that one more would take them to the top of the house.

There were only two doors on that flat, and one stood ajar. It led to a box-room. The other was locked, and the key had been taken away. O'Ferral put his ear to the keyhole, but could hear nothing.

"House seems to be empty," he whispered to Quaintance, who held up his hand, got down on his knees, and listened for anything the floor might have to tell. He stayed thus for quite a minute before he got quietly to his feet again.

"There's some one inside," he said, and at that moment steps were distinctly audible above the patter of rain on the roof. From the darkness below came the dull thud of a door closing. The stairs creaked ominously.

"Stand by!" said Quaintance, and they lined up beside him, their backs to the wall.

CHAPTER XXII

MAITRE GEORGES IS REQUIRED TO SOLEMNIZE DOMINIC SEAGER'S MARRIAGE

When Seager and Arendsen left the Blue Rabbit together, and after the latter had induced his half-intoxicated companion to leave the Duchesse alone for the present, had led him away from the postern past Quaintance in the shadow of the brasserie door, it was almost four in the morning of the last day allowed by Miles Quaintance's will for wresting his millions from the outstretched hands of charity. And it inflamed Black Dirck's mind still more to think that that had begun so ill. Four of its precious hours had already sped, and four more must pass before they could make any further move.

But Seager, still artificially elated by the champagne he had swallowed in haste since Cornoyer and Quaintance would none of it, was boisterously optimistic. He clapped Arendsen on the shoulder as they crossed the bridge to their quarters on the Isle de la Cité, and, "Cheer up, old man," said he. "The game's going our way. With two heads like yours and mine behind it, our hand's a winner."

Arendsen looked round at him, evilly, but said no word, and Seager shrank into silence under his glance. They reached their rooms without further speech.

"Get to bed," Arendsen ordered then, and Seager, cowed, witless, bemused, threw himself down, dressed as he was, with no more than a muttered curse. Almost instantly he fell into a sodden sleep. But Arendsen sat up long after Paris was wide awake—to the last day which stood between him and the loss of that great fortune almost within his grasp, only sixteen hours of it left. He sat immobile, hands clenched, teeth showing, eyes fixed on vacancy, but his brain was very busy, and when he rose stiffly from his straight chair, the frown on his face had relaxed a little. He had formed fresh plans.

At eight o'clock he shook Seager into sullen consciousness, and his accomplice, raising himself on one elbow, glowered over at him out of bloodshot eyes.

"Curse you, Arendsen!" he growled savagely. "Why couldn't you let me sleep? I've a head worse than a menagerie of wild beasts, and——"

"You'll have plenty of time to sleep," the other assured him, with ominous quietude, "after I'm through with you. And I'll be through with you soon after twelve to-night. Get ready quickly. We're going out."

Seager started as he was thus reminded of the flight of time, and, curbing the retort which had been trembling on his tongue, rose obediently, caught up a pitcher of water with which he strove to slake the thirst consuming him.

Arendsen rang savagely for coffee, and, having seen to it that Seager emptied the cafétière while they both made a hasty toilet, picked up his own hat, led the way downstairs with a quick gesture. Seager followed him docilely, having realized in the interval the perilous gravity of their joint situation, the still more perilous position in which he therefore stood.

"Where are we going now?" he demanded morosely as they turned toward the north bank of the Seine. "You needn't be so infernally mysterious, Dirck. I've just as much at stake in this business as you. And more, if it comes to that."

"And more," echoed Arendsen, with the same ominous quietude. "It will go a great deal worse with you than with me, if we fail.

"We're going to talk to the Duke now. I got his address and the story of his so-called marriage from that man Chevrel, while you were bemuddling yourself with those others at the Blue Rabbit."

Seager scowled at him but made no verbal retort, and they pursued their way to the Rue St. Honoré in sullen silence, each occupied with his own scheme to outwit the other.

Their errand thither proved to be vain, for, when Jules Chevrel came to the door, in pyjamas, he could only tell them that Monsieur had left his rooms on the previous evening, gone elsewhere, with only a suit-case for baggage.

"He will be back, without doubt," the good Jules assured them, "but when, who can tell? He is a very erratic gentleman, my late employer, but it would seem that he has not yet tired of our mutual friend, Miss Lorraine, with whom I hope you had a satisfactory interview yesterday evening."

His leeringly significant smile enraged Seager beyond all reason: and he sprang forward, aiming a fierce blow at him. But the wily Jules, already experienced in the wild-beast ways of Americans, was not thus to be caught napping, and Seager's knuckles encountered only a hurtful surface of polished oak. Monsieur le Duc's door was closed against them, and Jules could not be induced to re-open it.

Arendsen had no time now to waste in argument or recrimination. He merely made a mental note of this fresh notch in his long score against the unfortunate Seager, and they set out to seek Monsieur high and low elsewhere, not to be baffled till midnight should strike and Miles Quaintance's millions be finally beyond their grasp.

It was already evening before they returned to the Rue Saint Honoré, and, once more plodding wearily upstairs, found the oaken outer door of Monsieur's apartment wide.

"We'll walk right in," said Arendsen determinedly, and did so. "Close both these doors, and bolt them."

"Who's there?" asked a curt voice which came from a curtained doorway at the other end of the corridor. "Is that you, Tissot-Latour? I told you not to come back?"

Arendsen strode forward without hesitation, and, pushing into the room, found M. le Duc on his feet, very angry at getting no answer to his enquiry.

"Who the devil are you?" demanded Monsieur, regarding this unexpected intruder with pardonable asperity.

Arendsen held up a huge hand, and, "One moment," said he, looking over his shoulder for Seager whom he must perforce trust to explain matters since his own French was too indifferent.

"Tell him that we're here on behalf of your cousin, Miss Lorraine," he instructed that individual, hard at his heels, and Seager bowed to the Duc with ironic ceremony. His lost self-confidence was rapidly returning, and he was well pleased with the prospect of baiting the man who had come between him and the vast wealth which should have been his.

"We are here on behalf of Miss Lorraine, my cousin," said he, chin thrust forward and scowling at Monsieur.

"You mean Madame la Duchesse des Rêves!" cried the Duc eagerly, and accepting their presence without further comment. "You mean Madame la Duchesse! Where is she? What has happened to her? Speak quickly! For the love of heaven, speak!"

Arendsen held up his hand again.

"Tell him to go slow, Seager. I want to understand all he says. We're going to thrash this matter out to an end here. Tell him to go slow and to pay attention to me."

"Why don't you tell him yourself since you're so important?" snapped Seager, his own self-importance ruffled by the other's tone. He turned to the Duc who was anxiously glancing from one to the other of them, and conveyed to him in drawling French some part of his companion's instructions.

"And you'd better attend to what I've got to say to you," he added for his own gratification.

"*Mais mon dieu, Monsieur!*" urged the Duc, "tell me quickly what you have to tell. Where is Madame my wife?"

"So she *is* your wife?" Seager asked sourly. "Are you quite sure——' '

"If you have come here to insult me," said Monsieur in a low, steely voice, "you had better——"

"Tranquilize yourself," Seager requested. "We're here to talk business, not to make fine speeches. And, if you feel that you ever want to see her again, you'd better reply to my question."

The Duc's face flushed darkly, but with a great effort of will he controlled himself, and answered, since he could not but comply, "Yes, I am quite sure."

"There seems to be no doubt about it," Seager told Arendsen, and the latter gnawed his moustache for a moment in silence.

"Then the marriage must be annulled," he announced. "Tell him all he needs to know, and ask him how much he'll take to stand in with us. It will pay him best to agree. Tell him plainly, Seager, that it will pay him best to agree, and that we're not to be trifled with."

He sat listening attentively, head forward, frowning, while Seager made matters clear to the staring Duc, having premised his story with the curt warning that they three were quite alone, entirely cut off from communication with the outer world, a fact further attested by the urgent ringing of the door-bell, which no one answered.

The room was an interior one and windowless, lighted from overhead by day. Its cupola was closely curtained now and shaded lamps shone from the cornices. The two adventurers had safely trapped their victim. And Monsieur knew that he was helpless in their hands. He could easily understand, too, that they were desperate men. Seager had told him their side of the story in cunning details. They had staked their all and were determined to win.

When Seager had finished speaking, he would have risen but that they simultaneously ordered him to sit still. And since it would have been futile to measure forces with them physically, he could but obey.

"We're waiting your answer to our proposition," Seager reminded him sternly.

"It needs no answer," returned the Duc, "but, since you think that it does,—I refuse."

"Tell him that he does so at the risk of his wife's life, as well as his own," Arendsen suggested craftily, and the Duc's thin face showed the feelings with which he received that statement. But he was no whit less firm. Whatever his failings he was no coward, and they could by no means frighten him into compliance with their most monstrous proposal.

"I refuse," he repeated, with stubborn fixity of resolution. "My own life is as nothing to me,—and you two will pay very dearly for any harm which may happen Madame la Duchesse des Rêves."

"He won't budge," Seager told Arendsen vexedly, and Arendsen fell to tugging at his black beard. He could almost foresee the failure of the foul plot which had promised such rich reward. And, while they sat there eyeing each other furtively, a clock in the corridor without chimed nine.

Arendsen started up with an oath which he could not repress. At midnight Miles Quaintance's millions would fall prey to charity. And, since it seemed that the Duc could not be coerced, since it was already too late to evolve any further feasible scheme, there was nothing left for it but to play his last card, with which he must, at all costs, recoup himself for the loss he had so far suffered.

He knew to a fraction what all his dealings with

Seager had cost him, and made up his mind in a twinkling what he must do. It only nettled him that he could not act in the matter except through Seager, who would doubtless seek to despoil him of some part of his fair profit. But he felt confident that he could overcome his accomplice in any battle of wits.

"Ask the Duke how much he's willing to pay for the safe return of the Duchess," he said suddenly, and Seager lay back in his chair with a quick chuckle of amusement.

"Faith! you're a downy old bird, Dirck," said he admiringly. "It will be a wet day when you haven't a card or two up your sleeve! And so you've given up hope of scooping in the jack-pot, have you? How about me? Share and share's my motto, you know."

"You ask him the question," growled Arendsen threateningly, and Seager turned to the Duc with a serious face, fixing in his own mind the lowest figure he would accept for himself in such a transaction. He had long ago learned that the Duc was reputed a rich man, in France.

Monsieur thought long and earnestly ere replying. That was not the first time he had had to do with blackmailers, and he judged that no small sum would satisfy the two who had thus bearded him in his own den. He had also repented already his hasty condemnation of the Duchesse, his first suspicion that she had befooled him. And it seemed that the younger of the two scoundrels confronting him was that same cousin who, but for him, might have shared with her the dead American's millions. He foresaw a heavy drain on his purse, but was prepared to meet that if he could not otherwise succor the innocent victim of his own ill-doing. He had almost groaned aloud at thought of what she might have suffered in their hands.

"He asks how much we are willing to take," Seager explained to Arendsen as soon as the Duc had spoken, and looked curiously across at his fellow-conspirator.

"It will cost him a hundred thousand francs to settle with me," said that individual decisively. "And, look here, Seager! Be very careful what you're about. I've stood all I'm going to stand from you. It will be the very worst night's work you ever did if you spoil this deal."

Seager's face fell. He would fain have exacted an equal amount for himself, but the cold menace in his confederate's hissing speech caused him no little uneasiness, and he deemed it wise to be moderate in his demands.

"I can't start life all over again with less than ten thousand dollars," he snarled, "and don't you forget, Arendsen, that what you draw from the pool clears up all old scores between you and me.

"We'll take a hundred and fifty thousand francs," he told the Duc brusquely. "And you needn't haggle about it, my friend. Let me tell you that my cousin is cheap at the price, even without my uncle's money—money that by rights is mine. You'll give us your cheque for a hundred and fifty thousand. We'll take you to where she is, and you'll stay there with her till we've drawn the cash."

The Duc did not hesitate. The payment of such a ransom would pinch him most sorely, but he could see no other resource. And it was no time for bargaining.

"*Bien, Monsieur,*" he agreed. "I shall write you a cheque at once if you will allow me, and—you will restore the Duchesse to me to-night?"

Seager nodded sulkily, stung by the thought that he might have had more for the asking.

"You'll write two cheques," he stipulated. "One for a hundred thousand, the other for fifty. And you'll give us your sacred word of honor not to molest us in any way, either now or afterwards. Here's pen and ink. Don't waste time."

The Duc took the pen from him, bowing.

"I give you my word," said he simply. "And . . . . . here are the cheques. They are both 'to bearer.' They will be honored whenever you care to present them. Now—let us go, if you will be so good."

"Can we trust him?" asked Arendsen doubtfully.

"How can we help ourselves?" Seager demanded, and led the way to the door.

The Duc followed him, and Arendsen followed the Duc very closely, but such precaution proved needless, for Monsieur, having resigned himself to their demands, had no intention of breaking the promise which he had made them. Seager hailed a cab as soon as he reached the street, Arendsen shepherded the Duc into it, and the three drove off together in the direction of the Latin Quarter.

Seated, silent, within the cab, as it rumbled noisily down the street, entirely sober again and thus dismally disappointed in all his long-cherished anticipation, Seager had time to think over his own grievances against fate. And these began to loom ever more loftily before his mental vision. What were a paltry ten thousand dollars to him in comparison with the ten millions the man at his side had cost him! And why should

Arendsen reap so much more than himself from their mutual venture! Were all his own dreams to come to naught thus tamely?

His hands were clenched, his forehead damp, he could have gnashed his teeth and cried aloud in impotent despair while his mind, twisting, turning, in the mesh of circumstance, could find no outlet from such pitiful predicament. The trundling cab was traveling too fast for him. He wanted time to think. There must be some way out, some slim last chance for him to clutch at.

There *was!*

The inspiration came to him almost too late. There *was* a way, a way not perhaps altogether clear but well worth following toward that result for which his longing had grown well-nigh insupportable since it had seemed beyond his utmost reach. The cab had crossed the bridge. There was no time now to explain to Arendsen—but he would surely understand that the game was still worth the candle. They were not going to give ten millions—and the girl—up without a final desperate effort.

"Dirck!" he said whispering excitedly, while the Duc strove to understand, "I've got a plan, one that can't fail us. I'll tell you afterwards. We must take Maître Georges along."

Dirck Arendsen appeared to cogitate, but only for a moment. He too had been regretting very bitterly the paltry outcome of their enterprise. He was still to be tempted by the bait of ultimate success.

"All right," he answered. "We'll take him along. It's at your risk."

The cab was stopped. Seager jumped out, after a hasty word of explanation to the Duc, who sat impatiently with Arendsen until the former came back accompanied by a little, mean-looking, black-clad fellow who clambered in with a nod of greeting, and they drove on to the corner of the Impasse de Paradis where they all alighted. The cab was dismissed, and, after it had driven away, the four turned down the cul-de-sac toward the deserted house at the top of which the Duchesse was confined.

Monsieur le Duc was no coward, and yet he shivered involuntarily as he followed Seager into the dark, dank corridor, while Arendsen carefully closed and locked the door behind the soft-footed stranger they had picked up.

"Tread quietly," Seager commanded, and they climbed with all precaution to the first floor, entering a room whose door opened noiselessly under his careful manipulation.

He struck a light, which he applied to a tallow candle stuck in a bottle upon a table littered with the remains of a meal. The Duc looked about him anxiously, and his heart sank at what he saw. The window was strongly shuttered and he was alone there with this most unprepossessing pair.

The little man had not entered, was waiting outside in a state of extreme perturbation. For Maître Georges, sworn notary public, and the most rascally among the rascals of his profession in Paris, had been mixed up in many shady transactions, and not a few which were criminal, but in none heretofore which promised so ill as this. But the advanced fee he had pocketed that afternoon had been a very liberal one, and the assurance of a still more handsome douceur in return for his services had served to still his few qualms of conscience. His fears also kept him quietly waiting where he was until his clients should call upon him.

They came forth, ten minutes later, the two of them, leaving the room in which they had been dark and strangely silent, and Seager, groping for him in the gloom, laid a hand on his sleeve, causing him to start aside in sudden alarm.

"I want you to solemnize my marriage, now, Maître Georges," said his strange client in a very tremulous voice. "The lady's waiting upstairs—come this way. You have all the papers prepared, haven't you?"

CHAPTER XXIII

TIME IS MONEY—AT THE RATE OF A MILLION A MINUTE

Quaintance, backed to the wall on the landing at the top of the stairs, heard them coming. He pushed O'Ferral and Cornoyer toward the open door of the box-room behind, and they all slipped soundlessly into it, not daring even to whisper. And, presently, three pairs of shuffling feet came to a stop on the landing outside, a key turned in the locked door.

The feet shuffled onward. It seemed that another door barred their way. That in turn opened with a faint click. A ray of light shot outward ere it closed again. A man's voice spoke, and was answered by a woman's.

"She's in there," said Quaintance, under his breath, and tiptoed from his hiding-place.

O'Ferral, following, caught at his arm.

"Don't burst in on them. Let's hear all those fellows have to say first, if we possibly can. They haven't locked the door behind them. We're free of the meeting."

They halted within the passage between the two doors, and listened intently, without compunction. Quaintance had one hand on the key, one ear at the keyhole.

Within, in the dimly lighted, dishevelled studio, the Duchesse and Fanchette had sprung to their feet as

Seager pushed past the frail barricade they had erected lest anyone entering should surprise them asleep. After him came another, a little, wizened, dried-up mannikin, black-clad, of evil countenance, behind whom appeared Arendsen, his swart features grimly inflexible. He pulled the door to, and Seager spoke first.

"Hope you haven't been anxious while I've been away, Dagmar," he observed with pretentious solicitude. "I couldn't get back any sooner. I've been very busy on your behalf the whole day, and—I've brought you news. I was going to say bad news, but better be honest. It isn't bad news for either of us, and—I'm sure you won't break your heart over it: your husband was nothing to you, you know. He's dead, Dagmar. Dropped off quite suddenly—heart disease, the doctors say."

She stared at him, in doubt and dismay unspeakable, striving to understand, fain to disbelieve what he said. But his eyes did not drop before hers as usual. He gave her back glance for glance, boldly, seemed to be speaking the truth. And, little cause as she had to esteem the Duc, the shock of such news, told thus, almost stunned her.

"What your cousin says is quite true, Miss—Duchess," Arendsen affirmed solemnly. "This gentleman is a lawyer. He'll tell you anything else you may wish to know."

She darted a quick, despairing glance in the direction of Maître Georges, and that individual, well primed with whispered instructions by Seager on their way upstairs, shambled forward.

"Alas! Madame," said he with a great assumption of sympathy, "what my friends tell you is a sad fact.

M. le Duc lies dead—downstairs. The body was brought hither that—that—that——"

The clock in the corner struck the hour with a sudden, sonorous clang, and almost instantly Notre Dame tolled eleven.

The Duchesse shivered violently, leaned still more heavily on Fanchette's trembling arm. Seager started forward.

"Come, Dagmar," he said, in what he meant for a tender tone, "you mustn't give way, you know. It's sudden, of course, but think—it's all for the best, isn't it! He was nothing to you, and—you're free of him now. Think what that means to you—and to me."

His face darkened as she shrank from him in such loathing as was plain to all. And, spurred on by a virulent glance from Arendsen, he made his fell purpose more clear to her.

"This is no time to stand on ceremony. You know what I want you to do for me, Dagmar, and—you're free to marry me now. Take my word for that—or, if you won't, we'll take you downstairs and show you the body. It was brought here to satisfy you that you're really free.

"And just think of me as well as yourself," he went on querulously. "I'm more than fully entitled to my half of our uncle's fortune, and you'll be none the worse of the other half either. It will do you no harm to go through the form of marriage with me, and I'll swear you'll never see me again after that unless you send for me. All I want's the marriage certificate, to show to the lawyers in San Francisco—a little enough thing, too, considering all that my uncle did for you. You will, Dagmar, won't you? For my sake!"

He looked at her in impatient appeal, a great sense of his own unfortunate plight moving him to unusual pathos. And she at length spoke.

"I will not," she said very distinctly.

Seager's gaze shifted to the clock and returned to her.

"By God. But you *will*, my girl," he cried hoarsely, glaring at her, quite beside himself, "and without any more ado. If you won't be led I'm the man to drive you.

"Get your papers ready, you fool!" he snarled to the cringing notary.

"Dirck, drag that old hag away and keep her quiet till she's wanted. She'll have to sign as a witness after we're through with the ceremony."

He strode over to the Duchesse, his hands raised to wrest her from Fanchette, his face flushed, his eyes shot with blood, blindly set in his desperate purpose. And Arendsen, at his shoulder, no less determined, had clutched cruelly at the old serving-woman's arm when a stifled exclamation from Maître Georges, very busy in the background with his portfolio, caused them to turn on their heels.

"Hands up, both of you!" snapped a voice that sounded to them like the crack of doom, and both withdrew empty hands from behind their backs, raised these in instant obedience before two revolvers, cocked, not a foot from their foreheads.

"Step back to the wall," commanded their captors, pressing upon them, and they were wise enough to comply without a second's delay.

"'Bout face! Keep your hands up."

They turned, and remained in that ignominious posture while the whining Maître Georges was inducted between them by the third of the three men who had thus surprised them, and who forthwith relieved Seager and Arendsen of the concealed weapons they carried. Maître Georges, it seemed, was unarmed.

"'Bout face!" once more came the crackling command, and they faced about like automatons, Maître Georges moving instinctively with the others.

"Now stay where you are. You may drop your hands, but the first of you who makes the slightest movement otherwise will make no more. Understand?"

Seager nodded. He was breathing stertorously, through set teeth, eyes dilated, unable to comprehend what had happened. Arendsen nodded also, against his will, in answer to a significant crooking of his questioner's trigger-finger. And, "*Oui, oui, Monsieur!*" wailed Maître Georges, no less bewildered but very anxious to save his own skin.

"Keep an eye on them for a moment, O'Ferral, and you too, J. J.," said the same speaker, and turned to where the Duchesse and Fanchette were still standing in almost equal amazement.

"Your pardon," he said, bowing courteously, and both recognized him at the same instant. He was the same man whom the Duchesse had met first at Martin's, then on the seashore at Stormport, and lastly, at the Elysée, the same man to whom Fanchette had sold her mistress's runabout, whose car she had commandeered. "Your pardon," said he, bowing courteously, "but we've overheard all that's passed. We were waiting outside—at your service. Won't you, please, sit down. You have nothing more to fear from those fellows, and——"

He sprang forward, caught at the Duchesse or she would have fallen. Her overtaxed strength had failed her, and she lay helpless in his arms for a blissful moment ere he carried her to the sofa and set her down tenderly there.

Fanchette, scarcely less overcome, flew to her, and for a brief space they mingled their tears, sobbing without restraint since the most hurtful strain of the terror they had undergone was thus lately relieved. And the chief of their rescuers stood staring wickedly at their aggressors until the sobs ceased, the Duchesse looked up woefully, and met his eyes again, so that their anger died and there was only left in them a look of longing, at which she flushed, so faintly that he did not notice it.

"Tell me what has happened, please, Mr. Newman," she begged piteously, ignoring all else in her stress of mind. "I have been held prisoner here for twenty-four hours, and—I don't understand."

"I must tell you, to start with," said Quaintance quickly, "and I must ask you to believe all I say without question meantime, that my name isn't Newman. I'm Stephen Quaintance, Miles Quaintance's nephew."

"You're a damned liar," cried Seager from the background, furiously, on the impulse of the moment. "*I*'m Stephen Quaintance, not you. And I can prove what I say. Don't believe him, Dagmar. He must be mad!"

Quaintance wheeled toward him with a look which boded him ill.

"You ring off," he ordered imperatively. "Break his head with the butt of your gun, O'Ferral, if he opens his mouth again till he's told to."

O'Ferral made as if to obey him, and Seager subsided, glaring, with twitching lips, his mind in a ferment.

"I changed my name because of my uncle's will, and so that you shouldn't have to marry me. You *are* Dagmar Lorraine, aren't you?"

She nodded.

"And Duchesse des Rêves," she said drearily, oppressed anew by the knowledge that neither man nor woman may safely interfere with the dictates of fate. "I married the Duc des Rêves as soon as I heard of Mr. Quaintance's death, to escape——"

"To escape me," Quaintance supplemented, as she paused, at a loss to explain herself without hurting his feelings. He lowered his voice.

"I made the mistake of my life when I discarded my own identity, Dagmar. But I did it for your sake, that you might have my uncle's money and your own freedom."

Her eyes fell again before his and the story they told her. Her face was suffused now. But she would be honest with him at all costs. "I, too, made a great mistake," she said, very gravely, in a low whisper, and Fanchette, an arm about her, fondled her trembling hand.

"We have both paid very dearly for our independence," commented Quaintance in a grievous voice, "but —you are safe now at any rate."

"They tell me my husband is dead," she said, starting up, suddenly recalled to the actualities of her position. "They say he's dead—here, downstairs."

Seager had overheard her. He had been watching them with a ferocious intensity, knew all that he needed to know for the present. His drawn face shaped itself to a grin, cruel, mocking, malevolent. It might be too late now to win the hazard himself, but—he could still spoil their chances of happiness.

"The Duc is not dead," he cried across, braving O'Ferral's uplifted pistol. "We only drugged him. He is not dead."

He licked his lips at sight of the shadow which came down on Quaintance's face. So much at least of the score between them, he had paid off. For, the Duc living, and since he himself must perforce give up all hope of winning Miles Quaintance's millions, the man whose birthright he would have usurped was no better off. And neither could gain the girl.

But his heart failed him utterly as O'Ferral spoke, with a quiet certainty which appalled him. And Arendsen also cowered and shuddered under the portent of these curt words.

"The Duc des Rêves *is* dead," said the correspondent. "I went down to see him myself. You must have drugged him too deeply. He's been dead for a good half-hour."

They looked at the clock. It wanted but twenty minutes to midnight. And no more was said for a space, so harshly had the horror of it all gripped their minds.

"*I* had nothing to do with it," Arendsen urged, his strangled words breaking the tense silence. Seager stood huddled, shrinking, against the wall, Cornoyer, revolver in hand, confronting him watchfully. The man's lips were blue, his face the color of chalk. His fingers were twitching impotently.

"I had nothing to do with it. It was Seager who—"

"You held him, curse you, you dog!" his accomplice cried with a sudden, futile access of fury. "You had just as much to do with it as anyone else." And they glared ever more venomously at each other across Maître Georges, who stood, trembling, terror-stricken, between them.

"You'll both have to answer for it, anyhow," Quaintance told them concisely. "And the best thing you can do in the meantime is to make a clean breast of it as to the—— Speak up, Seager, since that's your name. Let's hear your story first and from the beginning. How did you get hold of my papers? And where are they?"

Seager slowly straightened his shaking knees, and stood for a moment, head bent, hands clawing convulsively at the plaster of the wall behind him, eyes darting hither and thither, teeth showing, like a trapped rat. Then he spoke, huskily, making full confession, incriminating Dirck Arendsen whenever he could. But Black Dirck looked straight before him, and listened, speechless. The clock ticked on in its corner.

When everything was clear to them, O'Ferral disregarding all else, made a quick suggestion to Quaintance.

"Steve," said he, without relaxing his vigilance, for Seager was eyeing him very closely now, on the alert for any least opportunity to spring past him, a chance, however remote, of making a last dash for liberty. "Steve," said he sharply, "the notary's here, with the documents all drawn out, and—it's ten to twelve. There's a million a minute to be had for the taking."

Quaintance nodded, without a word. He crossed to the door and locked it on the inside, withdrawing the key. Then he signed to the Duchesse, and she followed him dumbly to the furthest corner of the long room. They sat down together there, and the clock ticked on.

The three men, their backs to the wall, watched the minutes pass one by one, and soon, "Five millions gone—five minutes I mean," said O'Ferral warningly. But from the corner came only a faint whispering.

"You're free now, dear heart," said Quaintance to the Duchesse, looking with a new and wonderful knowledge into the depths of her tear-dimmed eyes. "We've strayed very far apart in our ignorance. "We've done each other much hurt. But you're free at last."

Her heart was beating tumultuously, her white bosom rose and fell stormily to the stress within. She was doubly beautiful in her distress, and he longed above all things to take her into his arms, and comfort her there. If she would only give him the right to do that——

"I meant very well by you," he went on humbly, "and, surely you will not blame me for the wrong I unwittingly did. Since the very first day I saw you I have had no peace of mind, and—and I didn't know then who you were. It is for yourself that I love you, and, if you think as I do, we'll keep our hands clean, let my uncle's millions go hang. Tell me what you would have me do. Don't let us make any more mistakes. Life's far too short to waste it in that way.

"Trust me, dear," he urged. "Let me stand between you and further harm. You are alone here in Paris. There's trouble of all sorts ahead. You need someone to see you through. Why not take me—now—for what I am worth, if you will? This notary, scoundrel though he is, may legally marry us. The papers are all prepared, in my rightful name. All I ask till you're willing to give me more, is the privilege of protecting you. Say something, Dagmar, but—For God's sake, don't say no!"

She had moved a little apart from him, timidly. What he asked of her seemed so absolutely impossible then—and under such circumstances. But his eyes still held hers insistently, and what she saw in them she had no strength to withstand.

Her eyelids drooped to hide the sign of surrender. The way had been long and weary, but here at last was the haven which she had missed. What the world would say mattered nothing while they two . . .

"You know—all?" she asked, hurriedly. "I am Duchesse des Rêves in name only, and,"—she glanced very wistfully up at him—"and a pauper in my own right."

"I am not altogether a pauper," he answered gladly, "but—had you been a princess, sweetheart, I might not have been so bold. And—you'll agree? Immediately after twelve."

"Any time after twelve," she assented in a low whisper, and he gathered her into his strong arms, kissed her unkissed lips, clasped her close to him, regardless of those looking on.

The clock in the corner chimed twelve, and Notre Dame echoed the hour of midnight. She looked up at him again, with a little frightened smile. A stifled groan came from the other end of the room.

"We're all ready now," Quaintance called across. "Tell that lawyer rascal to step forward and marry us."

Maître Georges stepped forward submissively, and they two faced him, the Duchesse still in her robe of state, like some beautiful, slender lily, the lamplight warm on her ivory arms and shoulders, Quaintance, tall and straight, in a suit of serge, at her side, his thin, sun-tanned face a fit foil to her shapely fairness. Behind stood Fanchette, with clasped hands, her worn features working. And, from opposite, Seager and Arendsen looked on, impotent, at the simple ceremony, while their two guards, revolver in hand, kept watch and ward over all.

Maître Georges performed his part most decorously, and in the shortest possible space of time the widowed Duchesse des Rêves was the lawful wife of Stephen Quaintance, sometime known as A. Newman: all as set forth, signed, sealed, and witnessed in a very précis of the proceedings, with an exact note of the day and hour, drawn up by the notary under that gentleman's personal supervision.

Which done, Quaintance drew his wife's arm through his.

"And now we'll face the music together, sweetheart," said he resolutely, "if you'll send Fanchette down to fetch in the police."

CHAPTER XXIV

FATE OPENS A NEW ACCOUNT WITH QUAINTANCE—AT THE NIGHT AND DAY BANK

On a crisp winter's afternoon the gardens of Madison Square were all bedecked in white, as if for a bridal. The leafless trees wore festoons of crystal and ropes of pearls. From the fountain rose a solid column of silver, wet, glistening.

The buildings about it were brave with diamond-like pendants which sparkled and shone as they dripped under a brilliant blink of late sunshine. Only the paths and streets where the traffic flowed showed black against winter's robe, their uproar an octave lower under the carpet which covered them.

Frost and snow and sunshine together had turned the drab park into fairyland, or so thought Quaintance, at any rate, as he stepped out into the pillared porch of the Fifth Avenue Hotel, his wife on his arm. They paused for a moment to look thankfully out at the scene there, and then, crossing Broadway carefully, turned up Fifth Avenue, in haste because of the cold.

Only an hour ago they had stepped ashore from the steamer which had brought them over from France, and, even on the voyage across, they had not, somehow, succeeded in shaking off the remembrance of all they had undergone there. But now, at last, they could realize that their troubles were at an end, could turn their backs on that nightmare past.

The murder of the Duc des Rêves had made a nine days' sensation in Paris. The trial, on that capital charge, of Seager and Arendsen, provided the papers with scare-headlines for a full month, but, when all the formalities of the law had been fulfilled and the two sent to the galleys to expiate there the crime they had not contemplated, the public drew a deep breath of relief, passed on to the next *cause célèbre* with a cynical shrug of the shoulders which was Monsieur's sole epitaph. For Etienne Aiglemont Saint-Georges Lorillard, Duc des Rêves, Vicomte Aiglemont, Seigneur de La Roche-Segur, was also held to have met with his due deserts.

With him no one sympathized either, and, since Madame la Duchesse, his widow, was quite unknown to the world at large, she escaped sympathy and censure alike. O'Ferral's influence, public and private, a factor much more powerful than had been apparent, had served to save her all undesirable notoriety. Quaintance had engaged on her behalf and his own the best legal talent at the French bar. In the end they came scatheless out of a situation unenviable in the extreme. And, as soon as it could conveniently be accomplished, Quaintance had brought her back home.

Small wonder then, that they looked about them with thankful hearts and glad eyes as they threaded the hurrying throng on the avenue.

At thought of their late independence they smiled happily to each other, and two or three of the passers-by, observing the couple, turned to look back at them over their shoulders. They were very good to look at, and their glad faces were very well worth a second glance on a winter's day.

"Where are we going, dear?" she asked him, and he gazed lovingly down at the radiant features upturned from their nest of furs. She was his wife now, this dainty, delicate creature, for whom he had fought and suffered as a man must to know the true value of victory. And it seemed the more miraculous when he recalled the last time he had sauntered up the avenue, alone, with no least thought of what fate held in store for him. He laughed aloud as he looked, but by no means because he thought the conjunction of fate and Fifth Avenue in any way incongruous.

"We're going as far's the Night and Day Bank, sweetheart," he informed her, "to get you a small wedding-present I've had stowed away there since I first met you. It's a long way uphill, and it will be dark, before we get there. Let's take a cab."

"Oh no," she protested, "I'd much rather walk. And you must remember, Stephen, how poor we are. We must be much more economical now. I've cost you such a lot already."

"All right," he assented, with a cheerful smile, "we'll walk if you want to, and spend the dollar we've saved in some other way."

"We'll have to be much more economical now," she repeated wisely, "and everything's so expensive here in New York."

They passed up the hill together, on foot. At the top Quaintance bade her turn and look back.

"It's good, isn't it?" he said, staring down at the long, crowded, lamp-lit vista with a sigh of sheer content. She made no reply, but the hand nestling warmly in the crook of his elbow moved in quick, affirmative pressure.

"Come on now," he ordered. "It will be dinner-time before we know where we are.

"It was here I first saw you," he said, halting her again on the steps of the bank.

"And I saw you," she admitted, blushing. "You were looking at me so strangely. And I didn't understand. Jules Chevrel was waiting for me in the cross-street. I was horribly frightened then."

"The—the dog!" said he, explosively. "If I ever come across him again, it will be a bad day for him."

"And yet, but for him you'd never have seen me," she reminded him.

He shook his head solemnly over that undeniable fact.

"True for you," he agreed. "It's a queer thing that his rascally machinations should have been the means of my meeting you. And that reminds me, I must pay you back the thousand dollars he charged you for the introduction?"

"I think it's been worth that to me, dear," she whispered, and he slipped an arm round her waist while he led her through the swing-door into the bank.

His former acquaintance there greeted him with great deference.

"Yes, we received all your letters, Mr. New—— Mr. Quaintance," said he, having been presented to Mrs. Quaintance and as soon as he could bring himself to give over bowing before her beauty, escape from his obvious enchantment to the dry details of business again. "The Bank is perfectly satisfied, and your old account will be transferred to the new one at once.. Will you please record your usual signature here.

" 'Stephen Quaintance.' Quite so. I thank you. No, not at all—it's a pleasure. An account for Mrs. Quaintance? We shall be only too pleased. You sign here, Mrs. Quaintance, just under your husband's name. Mr. Quaintance's cheque on ourselves for a thousand dollars as first deposit. Quite so. I thank you."

He handed the blushing bride her own private passbook and a slim folio containing checks And he was still bowing delightedly when Quaintance bethought himself of the diamonds. These were promptly produced and delivered into his own hands.

She looked down, entranced, at the lambent, rose-colored stones, one in each pink palm.

"Oh, Stephen!" she cried in a low and tremulous voice, looking up at him, "they're far too splendid for me. You should have married a princess!"

"He has," ejaculated the banker, before he could recollect himself, and drew back in direct confusion. Quaintance grinned most amiably in his direction.

"Here, give them to me," he requested, and tucked them into one of his waistcoat-pockets. "We'll take them to Tiffany's in the morning and have them set. And meantime we must get something to eat, somewhere——"

He regarded his wife for a moment with smiling nonchalance, and,

"Wait here half a minute," said he. "I'll be back before you can miss me.

"Keep my wife in safe deposit for me," he called to the banker as he hurried off to carry out the fortuitous inspiration which had come to him.

"We want something to eat, somewhere not too dull," he remarked to himself as he made for the telephone booth. "And we can't do better than dip into Martin's, eh?"

"By the way, Mr. New—— Mr. Quaintance, we have some letters for you," the banker informed him blandly when he returned. "I had almost forgotten, but—here they are."

"Thanks," said Quaintance, stuffing them hastily into a coat-pocket. "Much obliged to you. Good night. Come on Dagmar. It's dinner-time."

She bade the man of money good-bye, and was handed into a cab at the door by her most impetuous husband

"Martin's," said he to the cabby, and they were whirled off down the avenue through a snow-shower which made their shelter the snugger within.

"You don't mind, do you, dear?" he asked as they drew up at their destination.

"Not with you, Stephen," she replied happily, "and to-night. But we mustn't be very late or Fanchette will think we are lost. And—we must really be less extravagant after this, mustn't we?"

"We will," he assented, laughing, and led her in.

A waiter sprang toward them as they crossed the threshold of the same room in which they had met, unknown to each other and under such widely different auspices, a few short months before.

"The same table, sir?" he suggested breathlessly, and urged them with eager hands in the direction of his own domain.

Quaintance regarded him quizzically.

"*I* did the waiting the last time I was here," he remarked, "and your shiftlessness very nearly cost me—my train."

"Yes, sir? I'm very sorry, sir," said the man, satisfied that all would go well. "But you *did* catch it, sir, in the end, didn't you?"

Quaintance frowned and smiled and sat down, understanding the double intent of the question accompanied by an ingratiating smirk. And it happened thus that he no longer sat opposite an empty chair and alone, but face to face and at one with the girl he had not dared to speak to then.

The atmosphere of Upper Bohemia was redolent of ambrosia now, and Quaintance found the insouciant gaiety of its inhabitants much more infectious than formerly.

Outside, in the dark everyday world, it was snowing silently. Within all was warmth, and light: not too much of the latter, but just sufficient to show off fair faces, white arms and shoulders, bright eyes. Soft music swelled and ebbed on the fragrant air, the echoes of men's mirth, women's light laughter blending harmoniously with it. For there was the land of the lotus, where it is always sunshine and summer, where night is even as day.

Quaintance started as his wife spoke.

"Are you dreaming, dear?" she asked smilingly.

"Of the last time," he answered, squaring his shoulders again. "We've come through the mill since then, sweetheart, but—thank God! we're none the worse.

"Waiter! We want some dinner—the best you can do, only don't bother us. And bring us a bottle of that same Burgundy, will you. It's a lucky bin."

All they said to each other over that meal concerns themselves only. But it may be stated, that, when it was over and Quaintance had ordered coffee, a special brew to be made according to methods imparted to him by a merchant from Mocha whom he had once met on his travels, they both fell silent, looking about them with eyes that were very friendly and well disposed toward the others there. And they were still sunk in such wordless contentment when a cheery voice recalled them from the clouds.

"H'lo, Quaintance!" it said, and they looked up swiftly at the grey-haired individual in very correct evening dress who had come forward and stopped beside them.

Quaintance sprang to his feet, hand outstretched.

"Gad! but I'm glad to see you, O'Ferral," he cried. "Dagmar, this is a little surprise I planned for you. I didn't know whether O'Ferral was in town till I 'phoned from the bank. A chair, waiter! Where's that coffee? Fetch me my coat—I want my cigar-case. Or will you have something to eat first, O'Ferral?"

"I've dined, thanks."

"Then have a cigar."

Quaintance plunged a hand into his overcoat-pocket, pulled forth his case and a couple of letters which he would have tossed to one side had not he caught sight of the postmark on one of them.

He lit a match for O'Ferral, and kindled his own Havana, with frowning eyes on the envelope. Then he slit that open.

"Your pardon," he said to the other two, "but I want to see what this fellow says—and forget him."

His wife turned to O'Ferral, to whom she had much to tell. Their voices sounded far away and indistinct to him as he stared, through a thin blue curtain of smoke, at the paper before him. And he stared at it for so long that she at length took him to task.

"What's the matter, Stephen?" she asked, and her eyes grew anxious as she observed the bewilderment in his face.

He looked at her for a moment as if she had been a stranger, and then at O'Ferral.

"I wish you would read that to me," he said in a puzzled whisper. "I don't seem to get the sense of it. That wine must have gone to my head."

O'Ferral glanced at the bottle, more than half full.

"You must have a very weak head, Steve," said he concisely, and took the sheet from his friend.

But his expression also changed as he perused the epistle. He opened his eyes very wide and pursed up his mouth.

"Read it aloud," Quaintance ordered. "It's from San Francisco, Dagmar—from the lawyers there. Go on, O'Ferral. We're listening."

And O'Ferral obeyed, with good will.

" 'Dear Sir,' " he began, " 'We duly received your favor from Paris, enclosing certificate of your marriage to the ward of our late client, Mr. Miles Quaintance, as also proof of your identity, which we have since satisfied ourselves is competent. And in this connection we beg to express our profound regret that we were misled into recognizing Mr. Dominic Seager in your place, but, as you yourself were admittedly the chief contributor to that mistake, we trust you will not hold us unduly blameworthy.

" 'We note that you and your wife wished, at the time of your wedding, to forfeit all claim to our late client's property, and the steps you took to do so.

" 'You have evidently forgotten, however, that there is a considerable difference in time between France and the United States of America. The certified hour of your marriage was 12.10 a. m. in Paris, which in San Francisco would be 3.50 p. m. of the previous day, 7.05 p. m. in New York We have taken the highest legal opinion on this point, and it coincides with our own, viz., that Mr. Miles Quaintance, an American citizen, making his will in America and for the benefit of American heirs, did so on the basis, only and absolutely, of American time.

" 'We have therefore felt compelled, acting under our late client's explicit instructions, to forward the liquid assets of his personal estate to the bank in New York, to which you kindly referred us. And we wait your orders as to the disposal of the testator's real property.

" 'Trusting to be favored with your confidence—We have acted for the late Mr. Miles Quaintance for twenty years—and assuring you of our best efforts on your behalf, we remain, yours faithfully, Scroggie, Naylor, & Touchwood.' "

Quaintance's cigar had gone out. He was gazing witlessly at his wife, while she, no less perturbed, looked blankly back at him. O'Ferral glanced at his watch, and was silent, waiting for them to speak. And time ticked away, unheeded.

The restaurant was beginning to empty. There were vacant tables all round them. The world without was hushed by the snow.

Quaintance sat up suddenly and his bent brows relaxed. His wife leaned forward. O'Ferral regarded them both approvingly, with twinkling eyes.

"Well?" he demanded, and Quaintance turned to him in surprise.

"I had forgotten that you were there, O'Ferral," he said simply. "But it's all true. There's no doubt about it.

"And we're not going to buck against fate any more," he informed his wife. "We've hurt ourselves too badly at that game already."

"You mean that we must keep all that money?" she asked.

"Most of it. We can't well help ourselves. But we won't let the charities suffer, and—and we'll forgive Miles Quaintance—as much as we can. We'll take it that he at least meant well by you and me, dear."

O'Ferral pulled out his watch again.

"Time flies," he averred, "and so must I. I only looked in on my way uptown to shake hands with you both. And, d'you know, Steve, that you've been thinking it out at the rate of a million a minute!"

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